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February, 1991

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MYSTERY



MAGAZINE

THE MAN WHO LOVED NOIR

A New Amos Walker Tale
by Loren D. Estleman

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By Alvin Tresselt, *Dean of Faculty*

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Alvin Tresselt, Dean of Faculty, was Executive Editor of Parents' Magazine Press, the first editor of *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, and a board member of the Author's Guild. His 53 books for young readers have sold over two million copies.

But, that's not all. The financial rewards go far beyond most people's expectations because there's a surprisingly big market out there for writers who are trained to tap it. Over \$1 billion worth of children's books are purchased annually—some 4,000 different titles—many by new authors.

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"Am I really qualified?"

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I've learned a lot about writing for children and I love it. Now I'm passing my knowledge on to my students so they can profit from it. When I'm not writing my own books I spend my time at the Institute, a workshop for writers that does one thing and does it better than any other educational institution I know of: It trains qualified people to write for the young reader.

This is the way I work with my students, and my fellow instructors—all of whom are experienced writers or editors work more or less the same way.

to write children's books"

When you're ready—at your own time and your own pace—you send your assignment to me and I read it and I reread it to get everything out of it you've put into it. Then I edit your assignment with a well-tempered pencil, just the way a publishing house editor would—if he had the time. I return it along with a detailed letter explaining my comments. I tell you what your strong points are, what your weaknesses are, and just what you can do to improve. It's a matter of push and pull with each assignment. You push and I pull and between us both, you learn to write.

The proof of the pudding

This method really works. I wouldn't spend five minutes at it if it didn't. The proof of the pudding is that many students break into print even before they finish the course.

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"—my dream come true!"

"The thing that gives me the most satisfaction," writes Brandy S. Wells, Greensboro, MD, "is the idea that my story will be read by 150,000 Sunday school children—my dream come true."

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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

THE MAN WHO LOVED NOIR by Loren D. Estleman	8
OLEANDER by Dan Crawford	24
DEAD END ON THE MOUNTAIN by Kenneth Gavrell	36
THE INVESTIGATION OF THINGS by Charles Arday	61
HOSTILE TAKEOVER by Robert Halsted	88
LOST AND FOUND by George C. Fore	114
SO LONG, LANA TURNER by William T. Lowe	130

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE FRONTIER GUARDS by H. Russell Wakefield	144
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DEPARTMENTS

GUEST EDITORIAL by P. J. Doyle	3
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	87
UNSOLVED by Raymond Smullyan	113
SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED"	149
BOOKED & PRINTED by Carol Harper	150
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	153
THE STORY THAT WON	155

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by
P. J. Doyle

John Irving has a recipe for a successful mystery: "Develop the best possible people and have the worst possible things happen to them." Using this formula, there is no mystery why Bouchercon XXI fared so well. Over a thousand mystery fans from around the globe gathered at Kings College in London for three days in late September, where they mingled with nearly two hundred of mystery's best authors, editors, publishers, and booksellers—and the best possible things happened.

Named for California's Anthony Boucher, this convention provides an annual opportunity for fans to scan lapels for familiar nametags and move with ease among authors and other mystery professionals. Though

nearly eighty percent of the attendees hailed from America and the U.K., readers converged from France, Finland, Canada, Iceland, Greece, Germany, Belgium, Japan, and Australia to participate in the cameraderie.

The conference planners, headed by Marion and Robin Richmond of Ming Books, developed an ambitious three-track program. The college setting added a scholarly ambience to the scene. A well-attended dealers' room and ample autograph opportunities, seminars, panel discussions, and interviews kept attendees busy. Topics covered writing, publishing, and reviewing and reflected the diversity of mysteries themselves. Fans of the drawing room cosies and Victorian

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classics were treated with as much attention as devotees of hardboiled P.I.'s and play-dirty amateurs. The greatest challenge became which of the simultaneous events to choose. Leading off, a panel on "Whodunit? or Whydunit?: Plot and Character in Mystery Fiction" featuring Dorothy Salisbury Davis, W.J. Burley, Aaron Elkins, Janet LaPierre, and June Thomson was scheduled opposite "Move Over, Marlowe: It's a Woman's World" moderated by Susan Thompson with Jessica Mann, Marcia Muller, Deborah Valentine, and Barbara Wilson and "Welcome Aboard: New Faces" with Gwendoline Butler introducing Janet Dawson, Marjorie Eccles, Kay Mitchell, and Simon Shaw. Such difficult decisions abounded throughout the weekend.

In addition to creators of fictional sleuths, true crime was an integral part of the convention. Sir John Dellow, Deputy Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis, discussed Scotland Yard past and present.

Ample tribute was paid to Dame Agatha Christie in honor of her centenary. Robert Barnard moderated a discussion featuring Charles Osborne, Janet Morgan, Anne Hart, and H.R.F. Keating. The latter, fresh from Devon and a week-long salute to the Queen of Crime on

her home turf, praised the author's adroit humor and took to task those who slight Dame Agatha's skill. "The speed of the pen deceives the mind," he noted.

Many would agree that the heiress-apparent to the royal title is P.D. James, Bouchercon's guest of honor. Questioned about Adam Dalgliesh and Cordelia Gray, Ms. James noted that she feels she achieves greater realism with the professional detective. "The amateur can't continue to stumble over bodies." During her banquet presentation, she too acknowledged the accomplishments of Dame Agatha. With a low-key sense of humor that sat well with the audience, she did observe, however, that things were somewhat easier for the crime novelist in those days. "How convenient to have a fully staffed manor house in every village."

Scholarly papers and erudite digressions kept fans entertained during the three days of programming. A very lively debate was hosted by the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. Catherine Cook, curator of the Sherlock Holmes Collection at Westminster's Marylebone Library, offered the motion "that the house believes that the detective powers of Sherlock Holmes are vastly overrated." Geoffrey Stauvert,

(continued on page 6)

**What would you do if four
hours of your life were
suddenly missing?**

9

**Would you dare find out
what happened?**

8

7



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(continued from page 4)

Honorable Joint Secretary of the society, opposed the motion, and after a lively presentation with plenty of audience participation, the motion was defeated by a bare margin of three votes and Holmes's reputation was upheld.

As with most conventions, the festivities included a banquet at which toasts were drunk, remarks of an informal nature offered up, and awards presented. Sue Grafton, who is whisking Kinsey Millhone through the alphabet, was the Honorable Toastmaster for the Saturday event in the elegant surroundings of the Waldorf Hotel. Her publisher, Pan Crime Books, provided collector programs for the evening in the guise of Kinsey Millhone mystery dust jackets. A traditional British menu was graced with toasts to Her Majesty the Queen and the memory of Anthony Boucher. Robert Adey was introduced as the fan guest of honor, and official welcome was offered by The Right Worshipful The Lord Mayor of Westminster and Councillor David Avery. Anthony awards were presented. Sarah Caudwell, who had charmed many fans at a pre-convention reception in Legal London, took top honors for *Sirens Song of Murder*, the Best Mystery Novel of 1989. Karen Kijewski's *Kat Walk* received

Best First, Mystery Novel acclaim. *Honeymoon with Murder* earned Carolyn Hart the Best Paperback Original award. Nancy Pickard, fresh from a Bouchercon-bound mystery cruise on the *QE2*, picked up the Best Short Story Anthony for "Afraid All the Time." Colin Dexter, looking very much like John Thaw, who portrays Inspector Morse on the tube, accepted the award for Best Television Series for his detective, while Best Film went to Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

A Lifetime Achievement award was presented to Michael Gilbert, whose first of more than thirty mysteries was published in 1947. *Smallbone Deceased*, written in 1950, is considered a classic by many fans and critics.

Not only was Bouchercon XXI the first held outside the U.S., it was by far the largest undertaking to date. Marion and Robin Richmond accomplished a monumental task.

P.J. Doyle lives in Minneapolis. Her writing credits include the highly acclaimed collection of Sherlock Holmes stories and essays, The Baker Street Dozen (now available in hardcover and paperback from Congdon & Weed). Her mystery dinners and weekends are performed throughout the country. She is a member of the Mystery Writers of America and is president of the Norwegian Explorers, the Minnesota scion society of the Baker Street Irregulars.

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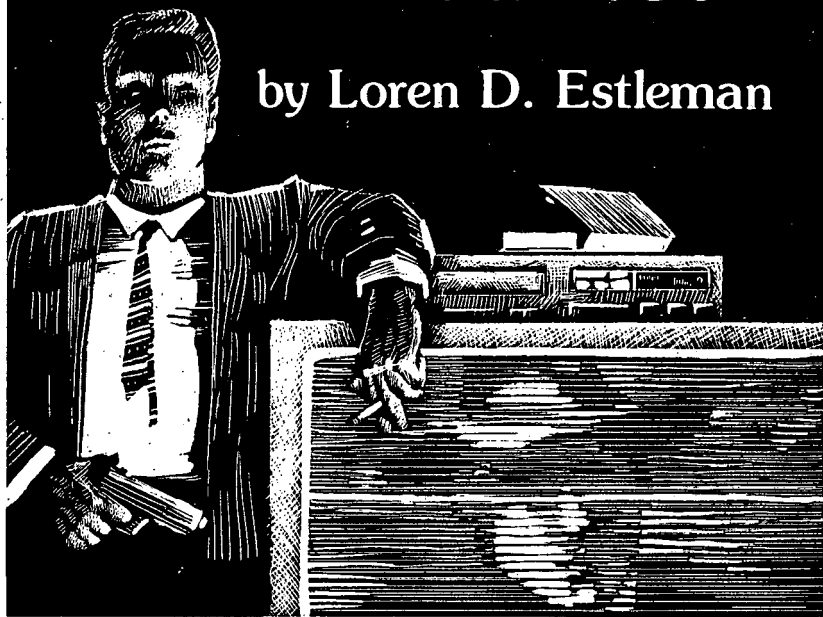
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FICTION

The Man Who Loved *Noir*

by Loren D. Estleman



The address I'd written down belonged to a house in Lathrup Village three miles north of Detroit, the only one in a cul-de-sac that ended in a berry thicket and a cyclone fence. It was a cool, sprawling ranch-style of brick and frame with four great oaks in the yard arranged in such a way that the

house would always be in shade. I felt the sweat drying on my body during the short walk from my car to the front door.

A woman in a gray dress and white apron with her hair caught up by combs led me into a sunken living room and went away. She spoke little English. "Thank you for coming on

such short notice, Mr. Walker. I'm Gay Cully."

She'd come in through an open sliding glass door from a patio in back when I was looking in another direction, a small compact redhaired woman with the sun behind her. Assuming she'd planned her entrance, that put her over forty. She had large eyes mascaraed all around, a pixie mouth, and a fly waist in a pale yellow dress tailored to show it off.

"I like your home." I borrowed a warm, slightly moist hand with light calluses and returned it. "They don't design them this way since air conditioning."

"Neil has an eye for that kind of thing. He's a building contractor."

"Neil's your husband?"

"Yes. Can I get you something? I'm afraid Netta has narrow ideas about her house-keeping duties."

"Just water. Anything stronger's wasted on a day like this."

She agreed that it was hot and came back after a few minutes with two glasses and a bowl of crushed ice on a tray. When we were seated on either side of a glass occasional table she said, "Neil's officially missing. Twenty-six hours. I trust the police, but they're outnumbered by their cases. That's why I called you."

"This puts me even up. I take it he isn't in the vanishing habit."

"No. He's never been gone without an explanation except for the time he was in the hospital."

"Accident?"

She drank and set down her glass. "He checked himself into a sanitarium. That was eighteen months ago, when the construction business was in a slump. Our lawyer advised him to declare bankruptcy, but Neil insisted on paying back every creditor in full. It was too much for him, the worrying, the long hours. One day he left for work and never showed up. The police traced him to the hospital after three days."

"I guess you checked there this time."

"I called every hospital in the area, public and private. No one answering his description has been seen in any of them."

"How's he been lately?"

"A little keyed up. We're just now getting back on our feet. I didn't think it was anything serious until his partner called yesterday to ask where he was."

I had some water. I wasn't thirsty any more; I just never liked asking the question. "Any reason to suspect he's involved with another woman?"

"Yes, but I called her and she swears she hasn't seen him in months."

"You know her?" I stroked my Adam's apple. A piece of ice had stalled in my throat during her answer.

"Vesta is her name. Vesta Mainwaring. She was the bookkeeper at the office until I made Neil fire her." She leaned over and touched my wrist. The light found hairline creases in her face. "I should explain something before we go any further. My husband is an obsessive personality, Mr. Walker. He's subject to binges."

"Alcohol?"

"No, but just as intoxicating. Come with me to the basement." She rose.

We went through a stainless steel kitchen and down a flight of clean sawdust-smelling steps into a cellar that had been turned into a den, mahogany paneling and tweed wall to wall. It contained a wet bar, Naugahyde chairs and a sofa, and a television set whose forty-eight-inch screen dwarfed the videocassette recorder perched on top. A set of built-in shelves that looked at first as if they held books was packed with videotapes instead.

"My husband's favorite room," said Mrs. Cully. "He spends most of his time here when he's not working."

I read the labels on the tapes. They were all movies: *The Dark Corner*, *Night and the City*, *Criss Cross*, *Double*

Indemnity—not a Technicolor title in the bunch, and none of them made after about 1955. "He likes murder mysteries, I see."

"Not just murder mysteries. Dark films with warped gangsters and troubled heroes and fallen women. There's a name for them; my French isn't very good—"

"*Cinema noir*," I said. "Black films. I like old movies myself. So far it hasn't landed me in psychiatric."

"You just like them. Neil sucks on them. In the beginning I watched with him. They were interesting, but not as a steady diet. I don't think he even noticed when I stopped watching. Lately he's been spending every spare minute in front of this set, exposing himself to I don't know how many murders, deceits, and depressing situations. It's not healthy."

An empty cassette sleeve lay on an end table. *Pitfall*, starring Dick Powell, Raymond Burr, and Elizabeth Scott. I went to the VCR and punched *Eject*. A tape licked out. *Pitfall*. It hadn't been rewound. "He was watching this one when?"

"Night before last. He disappeared the next day."

"When was the last time he got on this kick?"

"Just before he entered the hospital. About the time I found out he was having an affair

with Vesta Mainwaring."

"How'd you find out?"

"The police told me. The little slut caved in pretty quickly when they started asking questions about his disappearance."

I slid the tape into its sleeve. "Where can I find Miss Mainwaring?"

"She's listed. But as I told you, she doesn't know where he is."

"I'd like to hear her say it. What's the name of your husband's firm?"

She'd anticipated that and gave me a business card from the pocket of her dress. CULLY AND WEBB, it read. "Webb is the partner?"

"His first name's Leo. They've been together longer than Neil and I."

"Can I take this with me?" I held up the videotape.

"Of course. You'll need a picture of Neil, too."

Upstairs she took a five by seven out of its frame and handed it to me. Cully was a craggy-looking party in his late forties with sad eyes and dark hair thinning in front. "Any ideas on what he might be up to?" I asked his wife.

She hesitated. "It might sound crazy."

"Try me."

"You have to understand that he might be unbalanced," she said. "I didn't put it together the first time, but I've seen

enough of these things now to recognize the plot. I think Neil wants to be one of these *noir* heroes, Mr. Walker. I think he thinks he's in a film."

Cully and Webb had a small suite on the seventeenth floor of the Michigan Consolidated Gas Company Building on Woodward, a furnace-shaped skyscraper with a lobby out of Cecil B. DeMille, complete with sparkling blue lights mounted under the thirty foot ceiling and a bronze ballerina pirouetting among exterior pools. The offices themselves were just offices. A gray-haired woman with reading glasses suspended from a chain around her neck spoke my name into a telephone, and Leo Webb came out to shake my hand. He was a short wiry sixty with white hair slicked back, a power nose, and eyes like glass shards. His suit was tailored snugly, and there was something about the knot of his silk tie that said he'd given it a jerk and a lift just before his entrance.

When I told him my business, he steered me into his office, a square room full of antiques and statuary trembling on the rim of bad taste. I admired the view of downtown Detroit through his window and managed to sit down without upsetting a plaster cupid notching an

arrow into its bow on a pedestal next to the chair.

"Gay's overreacting," Webb said, settling himself behind a French Empire desk crusted all over with gold inlay. "Cully's just off on a toot. He's that age. He'll be back when he's had enough."

"Vesta Mainwaring told her she hasn't seen him in months."

"This town's full of squirming women. I know. That's why I never bothered to get married."

"How's he been acting lately?"

"Same as anyone in this goddamn business, jumpy. Every time it rains on Wall Street, mortgage rates go up and people stop building houses. If you're looking for security, keep going."

"You wouldn't know that to see this office."

He smiled and ran a finger down the side of a Dresden Marie Antoinette on the desk. "I'm a sucker for nice things. We're into developing in a small way. You get a sixth sense for dying old widows looking to unload their property in order to have something to leave their grandchildren. The bargains would surprise you."

Bet they wouldn't. "Do you know where Miss Mainwaring is working? I can't get an answer from her home phone."

"Her new employer called us for a reference." He slid the

pointer down the side of one of those nifty message caddies and punched up the cover. "Ziggy's Chop House on Livernois." He gave me a telephone number.

I wrote it down in my old fashioned notebook. "Do you always hang on to the new numbers of former employees?"

"Everybody has their own records system, and they take it with them when they go. Calling them saves a lot of decoding time."

"Can I see Cully's office?"

"I'll have Frances show you." He picked up his telephone.

"Partners sometimes take out insurance policies on each other," I said when he was through. "Anything like that here?"

"The premiums are too dear for the shoestring we operate on most of the time. His half of the business goes to his wife. Are you suggesting I did something nasty?" A pair of shardlike eyes glittered.

"Just sweeping out all the corners." Someone knocked and the woman I'd spoken to outside stuck her gray head into the office. I stood. "Thanks, Mr. Webb. I'll let you know if he turns up."

He remained seated. "Just tell him to wash off the powder and perfume before he reports to work."

Neil Cully's office was a poor

containing a plain desk and file cabinet and an easel holding a pastel sketch of an embryonic building. The only personal items were a picture of Gay Cully on the desk and a framed movie poster on one wall for *This Gun for Hire*, with Alan Ladd looking sinister in four colors under a fedora. Frances stood in the doorway while I went through the file cabinet and desk. I found files and desk stuff. The message pad by the telephone was blank, but there were indentations in the top page.

"The police called this morning," Frances said. "They said not to disturb anything in the office."

I looked at my watch. "Okay if I call my answering service?"

When she said yes, I lifted the receiver and dialed the number for Cully and Webb. The telephone rang in the reception area. Frances excused herself and withdrew. I laid the receiver on the blotter and tried the trick with the edge of a pencil on the message pad. It made the indentations clearer but not legible. I smoothed out some unedifying crumples in Cully's wastebasket, found a sheet that had been torn off the pad, and got it into my pocket just as Frances returned. I cradled the receiver.

"Odd, there was no one on the other end," she said.

"Kids." I thanked her and left before she could work it out.

In the elevator I looked at the sheet. An unidentified telephone number. I tried it in a booth on the street.

"Musuraca Investigations," wheezed a voice in my ear.

I hung up without saying anything. I knew Phil Musuraca; not personally or even by sight, but the way a hardworking gardener knows a destructive species of beetle. Where he had gone, no honest investigator could follow without risking having a safe drop on him with Musuraca's name on it. What his number was doing in Neil Cully's wastebasket was one for Ellery Queen.

"Hello?" A low voice for a woman, with fine grit in it, like a cat's lick. Conversations collided in the background with the snarling and cracking of a busy griddle. I could almost smell the carcinogens frying at Ziggy's Chop House. "Vesta Mainwaring?"

"Speaking. Listen, I'm busy, so if this is another obscene call, get to the dirty part quick."

I introduced myself and stated my business. I was looking across my little office at Miss August, kneeling in yellow shorts, high heels, and nothing else behind some convenient

shrubbery on the calendar. I wondered if Miss Mainwaring ever trimmed hedges.

"Like I told Mrs. Cully and like I told the police, I haven't seen Neil since last fall."

"Not seeing him doesn't cover telephone calls and letters."

"You forgot telegrams, which I didn't get either. I lost one good job over that crumb, you want me to lose a lousy one, too?"

There was no reason to play the card, just the fact I hadn't any other leads. "What about Fat Phil, heard from him?"

The little silence that followed was like tumblers dropping into place. When she spoke again the background noise was muffled, as if she had inserted her body between it and the telephone. "What do you know about him?"

"Meet me and we'll swap stories."

"Not here," she said quickly. "Do you know the Castinet Lounge on Grand River? I get off at ten."

"I'll find it." I hung up and checked my watch. Quitting time. Five hours to kill. I had dinner at a steak place on Chene and stopped at a video store on the way home to rent a VCR from a kid I wouldn't have let follow me into an arcade after sunset.

At the ranch I fixed a drink, hooked up the recorder to my

TV set with the help of the instructions and a number of venerable Anglo-Saxon words, and fed the tape of *Pitfall* I had borrowed from Gay Cully into the slot. It was a tight black and white crimer the way they made them in 1948, starring Dick Powell as an insurance agent who has an extramarital affair with sultry Elizabeth Scott, only to run afoul of her embezzler boyfriend and a sex-driven insurance investigator played by Raymond Burr at his pre-Perry Mason heaviest. Powell kills the boyfriend and Scott kills Burr, but not before Powell's marriage to Jane Wyatt is threatened, leaving their lives considerably darker than they were when first encountered. There were plenty of tricky camera angles and contrasty lighting and one clever scene involving Powell and Burr with guns in a room full of shadows and reflections.

It was a good movie. It wasn't worth going off the deep end over, but then neither are most of the reasons men and women choose to walk away from a perfectly good relationship. When it was over I caught a rerun of *Green Acres*, which made more sense.

The Castinet Lounge was the latest in a series of attempts to perform shock therapy on Detroit's

catatonic night life. A foyer paved with blue and white Mexican tiles opened into a big room covered in fake adobe with a bar and tables, a dance floor, and a mariachi band in sombreros and pink ruffled shirts. At a corner table I ordered scotch and soda from a waitress dressed like Carmen Miranda who wouldn't remember Sonny and Cher.

Ten o'clock came and went, followed by ten thirty. A few couples danced, the band finished its set, rested, and started another. They were playing requests, but everything sounded like the little Spanish flea. I nursed the first drink. What I did with the second and third was more like CPR. I was sure I'd been stood up.

Just before eleven she came in. I knew it was she, although I'd never seen a picture or been given a description, and my opinion of Neil Cully went up a notch. Coming in from the floodlit parking lot she was just a silhouette, square shoulders and a narrow waist and long legs in a blue dress and a bonnetlike hat tied under her chin with a ribbon, but as she stopped under the inside lights to look around, I saw eyes slanted just shy of Oriental, soft, untanned cheeks flushed a little from the last of the day's heat, red lips, a strong round chin. If you were going to kick over the traces,

you could wait years for a better reason: When her gaze got to me I rose. She came over.

Seated, she took off her hat, shook loose a fall of glistening blueblack hair, and traded the hat to Carmen Miranda for a whisky sour. When we were alone she said, "You don't look like someone who'd be working with Phil Musuraca."

"Never met him."

"Did Neil tell you he was following me?"

"Who hired him?"

She seemed to realize she'd tipped something. She took a cigarette from her purse and fumbled for a light. I struck a match and leaned over. I didn't smell onions. Whatever she had on made me think of blossoms under a full moon. She blew a plume at the ceiling. "You haven't talked to Neil."

"Me and the rest of the human race," I said. "That part I've been spending time with, anyway. Tell me about Fat Phil."

"First tell me why you're asking."

"I found his number in Cully's wastebasket. Did Cully hire him?"

"I suppose you could find out anyway. Musuraca's working for my ex-husband. His name's Ted Silvera."

"Where did I hear that name?"

"He pushed over a bunch of video stores downriver two years

ago. They called him the shotgun bandit."

"I remember the trial," I said. "The prosecution offered him a deal if he agreed to tell them where he'd stashed the money."

"Eighty thousand dollars, can you believe it? I keep telling Ziggy he should sell the griddle and rent out tapes. Anyway, Ted spit in their face and he's doing eight to twelve in Jackson. The police followed me around for a while, but when they got the idea I didn't know what Ted did with the money they laid off."

"But not Musuraca."

"Ted's jealous," she said. "He got wind about Neil somehow and had his lawyer retain Musuraca to tail me. Then Neil's wife found out, and I got fired. Musuraca gave up after that. But a week ago I turned from the counter at Ziggy's, and there he was, looking at me through the front window. He tried to duck, but he wasn't fast enough. I'd know that fat slob in the dark."

"Sure he's working for Silvera?"

"I went to Ted's lawyer and he said no. But you can't trust lawyers. Who else would care what I do and who I see?"

"Dicks like Fat Phil are simple organisms. They don't give up as easily as the police. Maybe he thinks you'll lead him to that eighty grand."

"If I knew where it was, would I be flipping burgers?"

I lit a cigarette for myself. "It's only been two years. Inflation isn't so bad you couldn't wait a little longer for the coast to clear."

"Thanks for the drink, mister." She stood.

"Sit," I said. "I don't care if you've got the money sewed inside your brassiere. I'm looking for Neil Cully."

"I don't know where he is."

"What was he doing with Musuraca's number?"

She sat. Carmen drifted over and I ordered another round. Our glasses were less than half empty, but it was that kind of night. Vesta said, "I don't know why he'd still have it. I told Neil about Ted and Musuraca—well, before. After that I couldn't get rid of him. He thought he was protecting me."

"Did you know he had mental problems?"

"What makes him special? My father died when I was little, and if I didn't marry Ted when I was sixteen to get out of the house, my stepfather would've hung me on his belt with every tramp in Detroit. When Ted got sent up, I saved everything I made waiting tables to pay for my bookkeeping classes. Cully and Webb was my ticket out of places like Ziggy's. Some protection job. Neil cracks up and goes to a

cushy sanitarium, and I'm back behind a counter."

"He's got a movie complex, his wife says. Your situation comes right off a Hollywood B lot. If he's gone bugs again, he might look up you or Musuraca to write himself in as the hero."

"I haven't seen him. I haven't heard from him. I don't know how to say it so you'll believe it."

"I believe it. Were you followed here tonight?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. Musuraca doesn't make a lot of mistakes."

"Okay, go home."

"What are you going to do?"

"Get a look at Fat Phil."

"You'll be the first who ever wanted it." She got up. "You know, I usually get taken home from this place."

I held up a fifty dollar bill. "That ought to cover gas."

She didn't take it. "I'm not a whore."

"You're a bookkeeper who waits tables. Put this in your ledger."

She smiled briefly, took the bill, and left, carrying her hat. I crushed out my cigarette, put down money for the drinks, and went out after her. Out front the parking lot attendant held the door of a four-year-old green Fiat for her, and she gave him a dollar and drove away. A moment later a pair of headlamps came on, and a black Olds 98

covered with dings pulled out of the first row in the lot and burred after her. By that time I was sliding under the wheel of my Mercury eight spaces over. I waited until the Olds turned left on Grand River, then swung out into the aisle behind it. Fat Phil and I had one thing in common: We never used valet parking.

Vesta Mainwaring lived in a house that had been converted to apartments in Harper Woods. She parked in a little lot behind the house and let herself in the back door. After a minute a light went on upstairs. The big Olds coasted to a stop.

I parked around the corner and walked back. The car was still there with its lights off. I got in the passenger's side.

Fat men are often fast. He sprang the gun from its underarm clip with an economy that would have impressed Hickok. But I showed him my Smith & Wesson while he was still drawing and he let his hand fall to his lap with the gun in it.

"You should lock your doors this time of night," I said.

"Who the hell are you?" It was a light voice for so much man. In the glow from the corner he had on a dark suit that could have been used for a drop-cloth and a porkpie hat whose small brim made his face seem

bloated. Actually it was in proportion with the rest of him. He would run three hundred stripped, a picture I got out of my mind as quickly as it came in. He had one eyebrow straight across and a blue jaw. I smelled peppermint in the car.

"Trade you my name for the cannon." When I had it—one of those Sig-Sauer automatics the cops are so hot on—I put it on the dash out of his reach and lowered the Smittie. "So much gun for such a little girl. The name's Walker. You wouldn't know it."

"Don't count on it. The town ain't that big, and the racket's smaller. What's the play?"

"Who's paying you to tail the Mainwaring woman?"

"Never heard of her. I was getting set to take a leak when you busted in."

"They arrest you for that here. How about Neil Cully, ever hear of him?"

"Uh-uh."

"He had your number written down in his office."

"So what? I ain't so busy I'm unlisted. Listen, I got a sour gut. There's a bag of peppermints in the glove compartment."

I opened it. The second my eyes flicked away his hand went up to his sun visor. I swung the Smith, cracking the barrel against his elbow. He yelped and brought down the arm.

With my free hand I reached up and slid a two-shot .22 off the top of the visor. "For a guy that knows nothing from nothing you've got plenty of ordnance," I said. "What's Vesta Mainwaring to you?"

"Eighty grand." He rubbed his elbow. "She's got that dough stashed somewhere. She can't stay away from it forever."

"You gave up on that once. What makes you think she knows where it is now?"

"Just a hunch I got."

"Save it, Phil. There's too much divorce work in this town for you to give up any of it on a hunch. What's your source?"

"I got a note in my inside coat pocket." He didn't move.

"Fish it out. If it's more iron, I'll shoot you in the head. It's not much of a head, but it'd be a shame to spoil that hat."

He took the note out slowly. I pocketed the .22 and took it, a square of coarse Big Chief notepaper with two words printed on it in block ballpoint capitals: VESTA KNOWS. "Who sent it?"

He shook his head. "Came in the mail. No return address and a USPS postmark. Same printing on the envelope."

"You'd drop everything and take off after her on an anonymous note?"

"I'd do it on less than that for eighty thousand."

I put the note in my pocket

and showed him Neil Cully's picture. His eyebrow rippled. "Sure, he was sniffing around the Mainwaring broad last year. I ran his license plate through the Secretary of State's office, but he wasn't nobody. I guess Cully could of been the name. I ain't seen him lately."

"Maybe you did and forgot. Like you forgot his name."

"Hey, I hear a lot of names."

I opened the door. "If I find out there's more to it, I'll be back and you and I will go a round."

"What about my guns?"

"Go straight home from here and I'll mail them to your office. Tell anybody you feel like shooting to take a number till then." I left him.

I caught six hours' sleep and was standing in front of the Detroit Public Library when they unlocked the doors. The film section had several picture books on *cinema noir* and one scholarly tract, *Dark Dreams: Psychosexual Manifestations of Hollywood Crime Movies Circa 1945-1955*, by Ellis Portman, Ph.D. It had been published that year by Wayne State University Press. I lugged the thick volume over to a reading table and waded through a grand's worth of four-dollar words, then turned to the author's biography at the back. Ellis Portman, it said, taught psychology

and film courses at Wayne State.

I also found a withdrawal card at the back bearing signatures of those who had checked the book out recently. I took it.

A public telephone on the main floor put me in touch with Dr. Portman and an acquaintance in the Detroit bureau of the FBI who owed me a favor. I made an appointment with Portman and stopped at the Federal Building on the way to give my acquaintance the note Phil Musuraca had given me.

The room number I'd gotten from Portman belonged to a small auditorium lit by only the black and silver images fluttering on a square screen at the far end. I found a seat in time to watch Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer careening down a country road in a big car with bug-eye headlamps toward a roadblock. Spotting the armed men in uniform, Jane Greer said, "Dirty double-crossing—" and shot Mitchum, who sent the car into a spin while the woman traded fire with the officers. After she was killed and the car came to a stop, a cop opened the driver's door and Mitchum flopped out, dead.

The lights came up and a small man with a big head, half the age I associated with a college professor, dismissed the students with a reminder that their papers were due Monday.

As they filed out, discussing the movie, I introduced myself and shook Portman's hand. Up close he was older than he looked from the back of the room. I sketched out the case on the way to the projector.

"Just another manifestation of the Don Quixote complex," he said when I'd finished. "How can I help?"

"Most books on *noir* are for buffs. Yours takes on its psychology. I thought you might translate the Latin."

He switched off the projector and removed the take-up reel. "We've always identified with gods and heroes. The appeal of the *noir* protagonist is he's more approachable than Beowulf or Sherlock Holmes. He's an ordinary guy with tall troubles, but he usually comes out on top, even if it does kill him sometimes."

"Kind of a complex world to want to be part of."

"Actually, it's simplistic. You've got your good guy, your heavy, your good girl, and your tramp. Upon examination, the *noir* landscape makes more sense than our world. I don't wonder that an obsessive like your client's husband would prefer it to his own tangled affairs. His wife, whom he perceives as the good girl, represents the crushing responsibilities that landed him in therapy the first time. The

girlfriend, whose situation might have come out of any crime movie of the forties, promises adventure and uninhibited sex and a respite from his oppressive routine. The whole thing might have been made to order for a man with his fixation."

I watched him place the reel in a flat can labeled OUT OF THE PAST and seal the lid. "What would shake him out of it?"

"Nothing, if he's too far gone. If not, the shock of reality might do it. Our world has more twists than any screenplay. Villains turn out to be just guys trying to get along. Bad girls are just good girls in trouble. Angels become whores in front of your eyes. If that doesn't bring him back, electrodes won't."

Later, in my office transcribing the notes I'd taken in Dr. Portman's classroom to my type-written report, I took a call from my FBI acquaintance. We spoke for five minutes, after which I hung up and placed two calls. The first was to Gay Cully, who agreed to see me at her place that night.

It was just past dark when Netta, the Cullys' maid, answered the bell and told me her mistress would be with me in a few minutes. I asked her to send Mrs. Cully to the basement when she was ready and

went down there.

I slid the videotape I'd brought into Neil Cully's VCR and turned on the giant-screen TV set. As the black and white credits for *Pitfall* came on, I turned down the sound and switched off the lights in the room. Now the only illumination came from the screen. Shadows crawled in the silver glow on the tapes perched on their shelves.

"Mr. Walker, is that you?"

I hadn't heard her coming down the stairs. She was standing on the second step from the bottom, a small trim figure in a fresh-looking pale tailored dress like the one she'd had on when we met. One hand rested at her throat.

"It's not Neil," I said. "Is that what you thought, Mrs. Cully?"

"I—well, yes, for a moment. He used to sit down here with no lights on and a movie on the—"

"Couldn't be him, though. You know that better than anyone."

"I don't—do you have news? Where is he?"

I was standing in shadow beside the TV set. The full light of the screen fell on her, as I'd planned. I said, "You were okay for a novice. You only made two mistakes. One was natural: Who'd expect Phil Musuraca to show me the note or that it would find its way to the FBI?"

The other was just plain stupid.

"Printing *Vesta Knows* was good," I went on. "No handwriting expert could pin that small a sample on you. But that coarse paper holds prints like soft wax. When I had a Fed friend check them against yours on file from an old job, it didn't take long."

"What are you implying?"

"Nuts. You've seen enough of these films to recognize the obligatory explanation scene. The note was smart, all right. It got Musuraca back on Vesta Mainwaring's case and made him a prime suspect. Poor crazy Neil got himself involved all over again in Vesta's troubles and stubbed his toe, permanently. Just in case the cops missed it, you hired me, knowing I'd turn Musuraca eventually. The law couldn't convict him without a body, but his interest in eighty thousand dollars stolen by Vesta's ex would divert suspicion from you. You even read up on *cinema noir* to make sure your story about Neil's obsession would hold water. But that was where you made your other mistake, the bonehead one." I took the card out of my pocket and held it up to the light.

"What's that?"

"A withdrawal card from the Detroit Public Library with your name on it, dated a week before you reported your husband

missing. You shouldn't have checked out Dr. Portman's book. That was like signing your own name to a murder contract." I put it away. "How much is Neil's half of the contracting firm worth?"

Shadows and light played over her face. "Fifty thousand. More if I liquidate the real property. But that's not evidence. A note, a card with my signature. They won't convict."

"No, but they're enough to obtain a warrant to dig up that berry patch at the end of this street. Before I rang the bell tonight, I poked around with a flashlight. I found a lot of turned earth. With Neil's corpse, the note and the card will convict."

"You don't know what it's like."

I said nothing.

"Listening to him babble about those stupid films," she said. "Even when he had his affair it wasn't with a woman, just a character in a movie. I'd have killed him for that alone; the half-partnership will just be compensation for the past two years I spent living with a zombie."

"How'd you kill him?"

"Guess." She raised a gun in the hand she'd had resting on the banister. I hadn't seen it in

the shadows. "I sent Netta out just now," she said. "Call it a feeling I had."

"Drop it, sister."

I almost laughed. It was the one cliché the scene needed, and you could count on Phil Musuraca to deliver it. His bulk filled the upper stairwell. The Sig-Sauer automatic I'd sent to him by messenger after calling him was in his hand. I took advantage of Gay Cully's confusion to remove the Smith & Wesson from my pocket.

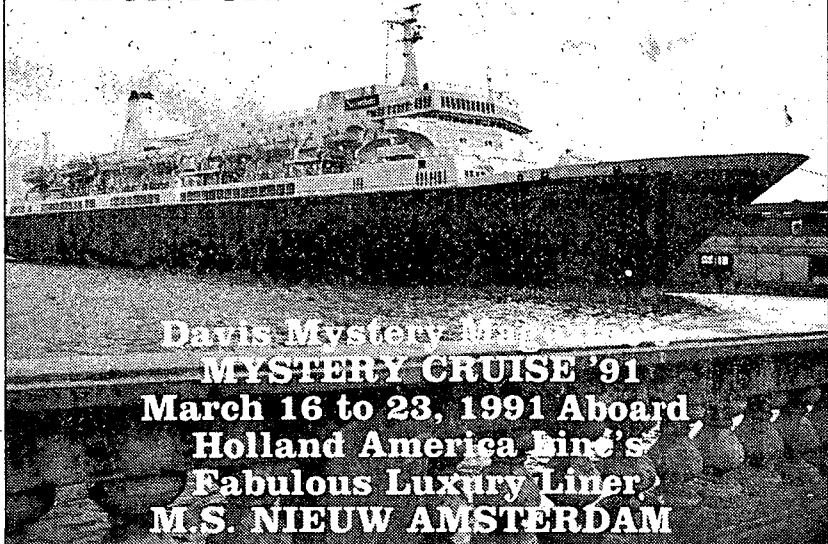
"Make that three mistakes," I said. "You're as much a sucker for that *noir* schtick as Neil. Just because a P.I. is greasy enough to hound a woman for eighty grand doesn't mean I can't call on him for help. You've seen the pictures, Mrs. Cully. A staircase is no place to make a successful play."

Her gun dropped, bounced down two steps, and landed on the carpet. Just then Dick Powell shot Byron Barr onscreen.

Fat Phil said, "I didn't care for that *greasy* crack."

I got away from the Lathrup Village cops around midnight. On the way home I stopped at the video store, rented some tapes, and watched Doris Day movies until I fell asleep.

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The much-publicized ending of the Cold War warmed many people. But there were some left out in the cold.

Jacob had served as a border guard for seven years without promotion, largely because nothing much ever happened along his border. His gun had been fired only at passing wildlife, though he never had any venison to show for this. Being a true soldier, he knew this kind of easy, lazy life could not last forever.

So he was not totally surprised when summoned to his commandant to be told that the State would henceforth try to do without him.

"There are these budget cuts," said the big, sweating major. "I am sure Comrade Jacob understands."

Jacob had been reading the newspapers, and he did understand. The ship of state had been rocking in the storm and was now jettisoning excess weight. He hung up his rifle, turned in his uni-

form, and hunted up his suit of civilian clothes, which did not fit nearly as well as it had seven years before. After bidding farewell to Bruno, the fattest, laziest German shepherd ever to infest a striped sentry box, he started walking to the capital.

His was not a large country and, with the help of an occasional farmer with a wagon, he reached the city in two days. Jacob intended to look up Rose, his girlfriend. She would do for a new commandant, telling him where to look for work, where to live, and how to go about making a new life in this new country.

But there was a man in Rose's apartment, a man who seemed to know the apartment very well.

"This is my fiancé, Josef Franks," Rose told Jacob. "He is a travel agent. Now that the borders are open, he thinks there should be money in that."

Certainly there would be more money in travel than in a pension that might or might not be paid next month. Jacob wished Rose well and set off to find a life of his own.

At first, it was not much of a life. All of Jacob's friends were in the army or in the same fix he was. Rents and prices were steep; his little pension was soon exhausted. There was certainly no surplus for new clothes. Half the managers he asked for work looked at his suit and said, "How long were you in the army, comrade?" The other half did not say "comrade."

Things were not improved by the fact that, after seven years as a border guard, Jacob was best suited for standing around or leaning against a wall. He was leaning on the wall of the Citizens' Savings Center, wondering where he could get a new gun, and whether he would turn it on others or on himself, when someone called, "Pssst! Comrade!"

Jacob looked down the street, away from the Citizens' Savings Center. A hand beckoned from an alley. Jacob thought about it, realized he had not so very much to lose, and strolled to the alley.

Towering above him was a massive fat man in a long black coat. Jacob's major had been a tall man; this man was inches taller and yards wider, with white hair and pink eyes.

"You look as if you need help, comrade," said the fat man.

Jacob spread his hands out, palms up. "That is no secret," he said.

"Hee hee," the fat man replied. "No secret. Yes. You were in the army, comrade?"

Jacob shrugged. "That seems to be even less of a secret."

The fat man shook his head at his features settled into a mourn-

ful pattern. "A very great pity," he said, "that after your years of protecting the State, the State cannot reward you. Still, that is no doubt an oversight, and the reward will be coming one day. Until then, comrade, you need help."

"I suppose you know where such help can be purchased?" said Jacob, a little sharply. He did not like the way the fat man kept giggling, as if enjoying private laughter.

"Yes, yes, I do, comrade," the fat man replied. "And purchased at so slight a price you might never know you had paid it. Do you know the bank?"

Jacob blinked. "The Citizens' Savings Center?"

"Yes, yes," said the fat man. He reached into a pocket of his vast overcoat. "Take this."

For a moment, Jacob feared it would be a gun. A tiny key glittered between the fat man's thick white fingers.

"The director of the ba . . . Citizens' Savings Center and I do not speak to each other," said the fat man. "It was a woman: you soldiers may understand such things. I would like you to go into the bank and transact some business for me. Take this and ask for the safe deposit box with the number matching that on the key."

Jacob plucked the key from the man's hand and looked at the number on the side. "What will I find there, comrade?"

"On top," said the fat man, "there is a layer of rubles. You may take these or leave them, as you wish."

On the whole, Jacob thought he would leave them, but one never knew. "And?"

"Under those, a layer of assorted marks. You may take them or leave them, as you will."

This sounded more promising. "Yes?"

"Then a layer of dollars. You may take these or leave them, as you will, just as you may do with the layer of yen beneath those."

Jacob was wishing he had a suit with larger pockets; perhaps he could borrow the fat man's overcoat. "But what . . ."

"Beneath all these," said the fat man, leaning forward, "you will find gold, in coins and in bars, a few pieces of jewelry, and some unset diamonds."

"Ah!" said Jacob.

"Ah!" answered the fat man. "Of course, you may take these or leave them, as you will. What do you think, comrade?"

"I think my heart will break if you ever ask to have this key back," Jacob said.

The fat man laughed. "Keep the key, comrade! It is small enough

reward for you, after your years of service. I want only one thing."

He lowered his voice. "Behind the bag of diamonds, you will find a brown envelope, just so long. It would fit in a wallet. There will be a notebook inside. Bring me the envelope, comrade, and you shall do as you like with the rest."

Jacob frowned. "A notebook?"

"A memento of my misspent youth," said the fat man. "The director would be upset to see it, so tuck it into a pocket before you come out. Go now, comrade. It is nearly closing time, and one would weep to see your just reward postponed until tomorrow."

Jacob had by now decided this was all either a prank of some kind or the product of a madman's dream. Yet, as he had told himself before, he had nothing he would regret losing. So he walked into the Citizens' Savings Center.

The manager stared at him, obviously feeling Jacob was a man who had never saved anything. But there was a box that matched the key. The manager took this, and Jacob, to a small room and locked them in.

Jacob licked his lips. Then he unlocked the box.

And everything was quite as the man had said: diamonds, dollars, gold, and all. There were even a few loose emeralds and rubies the fat man had not mentioned. At first Jacob began to cram things into his pockets. Then he swallowed hard, and put everything back.

"If this is to be my box," he said to himself, "there is no need to burden myself with everything at once. If this is a trick, and I will have only one chance to fill my pockets, I must do this in a disciplined manner."

So he took only several of the nicest-looking pieces of jewelry, and a few gold coins. People might look askance at a border guard who tried to sell such things, so he took enough paper money to support himself until the valuables could be disposed of.

He was about to close the box when he remembered that he had to save room in his pockets for one more thing. Nudging aside the bag of diamonds as if it were a bag of marbles, he found the brown envelope. He took it up and hefted it.

A peek inside showed him a little notebook, worn, with a creased brown cover. Jacob shrugged, and thrust it in among his paper money.

But he did not immediately close the box and call for the manager.

"This man values this notebook above diamonds," he said to himself. "What can fit into a notebook and be so valuable? Nothing

the likes of me could fool with; that's for certain. This man may well be a criminal, a spy; he has that look about him. Why should such a person have anything at all?"

Once outside the Citizens' Savings Center, Jacob walked right to the alley. The fat man looked bigger and less trustworthy than ever.

"Well, comrade?" demanded the fat man. "Do your pockets feel better now?"

Jacob pulled a long face. "A fine joke, my friend. This is what I found." He pulled out the three little coins which had been his entire fortune earlier that afternoon.

The fat man's eyes bulged. "What? Is that all? He must have taken it with him! The dog!"

"Some fine friends you have," growled Jacob. He took out the key to the box and made as if to throw it on the ground. "The joke is on both of us."

The fat man stepped up and clapped a hand on Jacob's wrist. "The joke is on one of us at least, comrade," he said, his eyes running up and down Jacob's suit. "Come, let us forget it and drown our sorrows. There is a nice tavern down this way."

"I don't think so," said Jacob. "I . . ."

"I insist," said the fat man, reaching into one pocket with a free hand.

Jacob was bracing himself for what he knew would be a bitter fight when a whistle shrieked. With a cry, the fat man released Jacob and ran. Jacob flattened himself against the wall as nine topcoated men dashed past him in pursuit of a fugitive who was moving very quickly for a man of that bulk.

Once they had passed, Jacob turned to go, only to find himself confronted by a tall man wearing the insignia of a colonel. "Was that man a friend of yours?" demanded that official, his eyes cold.

"Why, no, comrade!" Jacob replied, at attention automatically. "He was offering me a drink. I don't even know his name."

"Well, see that you don't learn it," snapped the officer, and charged after his men.

Jacob waited all night for a knock on the door that never came. In the morning, he tucked the coins and jewelry away and bought new clothes with his money. The rest of that day and night he spent studying the Citizens' Savings Center. At last, around noon on the second day, he went in.

The manager did not summon police. The key had not melted like a dream in daylight. And the box was not empty.

After days of want, and seven years in the army, Jacob was ready to party. And because the capital was in much the same mood; he did not find this difficult. He threw away the new suit he had bought; it was far too shoddy for a young man of such fortune. He found himself a new apartment and fine new friends: men and women who, like Jacob, were willing to play in the new sort of capital created by the changing government. Thanks to his days along the border, Jacob spoke more than one language and found himself hailed as a cosmopolitan wit by the men and women willing to drink wine that he bought.

The yen were quickly spent. After them went the dollars and the assortment of marks. Gold, jewelry, and gemstones presented no problems. A man of such obvious standing could dispose of such trifles without being asked embarrassing questions, and his new friends were always happy to help Jacob out with transactions outside his previous experience.

When one's money is used so openly, it quickly evaporates. Jacob could not be expected to know this, never having had much of it. But ignorance of the law excuses no man, and soon all Jacob had left were some very nice suits and, in the pocket of each suit, a few rubles. His friends found other wines to drink.

Jacob sat alone in increasingly smaller apartments, finding markets for his suits more easily than for the rubles. Finally he sat alone in one room, with his oldest clothes and no rubles at all. He had just one thing he had not had before he met the fat stranger. Now he had a gun.

"What a fool," he said to himself, sitting on the lumpy mattress. "I had enough wealth to last a lifetime." He looked at the gun and laughed. "It did."

But before he raised the gun to his head, he felt he ought to set down a few straightforward remarks about his old friends as a warning to any other soldiers who came to the capital and found themselves wealthy. Since he could hardly afford to buy a piece of paper, he rummaged through the room for a scrap of newsprint or wallpaper that would do.

He found his old wallet, but there was nothing in it besides his identification papers. And he couldn't write on those. There'd be trouble.

Next to the wallet, though, he found an old brown envelope. Inside it was the brown notebook so earnestly desired by the fat man. "Let's just see what this was all about," said Jacob. "Like as not it's something I couldn't understand."

He was correct. The book held nothing but telephone numbers: some forty on pages that were headed "Buttercup," twenty or so on pages headed "Cyclamen," ten on a page titled "Mimosa," and just one on the page marked "Oleander."

"That's that," he sighed. And he turned to a blank page.

But he paused, partly because he had no pen and partly because he had an idea. He thrust the notebook into his pocket and hurried off to his landlord.

"Please, comrade," he said, when the old man came to the door. "May I use the phone?"

"When you pay your rent," said the landlord, frowning.

Jacob clasped his hands. "I think I might be able to pay if I could use your phone just once."

"Young fool!" said the man, drawing back into the apartment. "Don't you know the horse always finishes last when you need the rent?"

"Let me try," Jacob pleaded.

The landlord stood aside and let Jacob walk past him. "Very well, I will wait outside. But don't try to take that lamp and pawn it. They know all my lamps, new and old, down at the shop."

Jacob paid no attention and quickly called the first number in the book. The phone rang twice.

"How did you get this number?" demanded the voice on the other end. "Who is this?"

"Buttercup," whispered Jacob.

There was a gasp, followed by two clicks. A new voice said, "Buttercup? What do you want?"

Jacob shrugged. "Money is always nice."

"Where are you?"

Jacob gave him the address. Whoever was at the other end hung up.

"Well?" demanded the landlord as Jacob stepped into the hall. "When do I get my money?"

"I don't know," Jacob answered. "Soon, perhaps."

He walked down to the street. Not much later, a long black car pulled up in front of the building. A tinted window rolled down just a crack.

"Buttercup?" a voice demanded.

"You brought money?" answered Jacob.

A hand came up through the opening. Clenched in it was enough money to pay Jacob's rent for two years. But Jacob said only, "Rubles?"

The hand jerked back inside the car and then came out, trembling, holding West German marks. Jacob decided not to press his luck. He took the money and the car sped away.

Jacob paid his rent and moved out that same day. A young man of his resources needed a better address.

He was a bit more choosy about his friends now, but the capital was still a place to enjoy life and spend money. He tried out his phone numbers carefully, just one at a time. There were differences that he learned quickly. Buttercup numbers brought him money, but Cyclamen numbers brought more, and Mimosa numbers more than that. And money was not all there was to life, even in a city succumbing to capitalism.

Was a soccer game sold out, with no tickets available? Buttercup numbers brought tickets. Did Jacob need his phone hooked up? Buttercup pleaded for mercy, but Cyclamen numbers resulted in quick service. Was there a champagne shortage, with all the better years going to government officials? A Cyclamen number or a Mimosa number. Had some friend of Jacob's gotten a bit too much of the champagne and started to shout very funny but very treasonable things about the Premier? Definitely a matter for a Mimosa number, though a Cyclamen number might do if Western journalists were visiting the capital.

Jacob kept the notebook in an old tobacco pouch, and never explained to his friends how he did so many wonderful things. "Oh, I just sit and have a smoke," he would say, "and the answer comes to me."

No matter what the problem, Buttercup, Cyclamen, or Mimosa could handle it. Jacob never had occasion to call the last number in the book, even when his current sweetheart, the daughter of the Vice-Premier, became the daughter of the Premier. (There had been a little accident counting the votes, but the results could not be changed because the West had sent reporters.) Lulu (her name was Louisa, a far too antiquated name for a young party animal in a swinging city) was told by her father that, for the good of the government's image, she must stop associating with these decadent playboys. Lulu missed a few parties, but Jacob missed her. He called a Mimosa number. Soon Lulu was among her friends again.

But this was the one call too many. Anyone with any political knowledge might have warned him that the Premier's family was beyond the reach of an ex-guard, even one with such a talented telephone. But Jacob had never bothered much about the politics of his little country. He knew some people made money that way,

but it looked too much like work to him.

One night, just as the party was starting, but before Lulu arrived, four dozen uniformed men rushed into the hotel, thrusting aside waiters and guests alike.

"Where's Mimosa?" they shouted. "We've come for Mimosa!"

No one there knew what they meant except for Jacob, and he said nothing. So all the guests were arrested. Jacob and two other men could not explain how they had made their money. They were charged with treason and sentenced to death. Jacob learned all this later, for he had been left in his cell while his trial took place. They asked him again and again about Mimosa, but he said only, "Mimosa is some kind of Oriental plant. I'm no florist."

The government could not decide which of the men was Mimosa, and finally decided none of them was. But they would die anyway, just to show Mimosa what was what.

The night before he was to die, Jacob was asked if he had any last request.

"Well, I would like to have a last smoke of my own tobacco, from my own pouch," he said. "Alone, perhaps in the warden's office, so that I could pretend I was in my own study at home."

The warden frowned. "I oughtn't to allow it," he said. "You know that's bad for your health."

"It is my last request," said Jacob.

So the warden sent to Jacob's house for the tobacco. "There are no guns in this room and the windows are barred," he said, locking Jacob in. "And I have guards outside the doors."

"I won't try to escape," said Jacob. And the warden went away.

Jacob took up his pipe, but waited a long time before he opened the pouch. Surely his house had been searched; at the least, the warden would have checked through the pouch for weapons. Well, at least he would have a smoke.

He opened the pouch and there sat the notebook among the pungent leaf fragments. With trembling hands, Jacob reached for the warden's phone and dialed the last number in the book. The phone at the other end rang once, rang twice . . .

"Who's this?"

"O-oleander," said Jacob.

"You are in trouble?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, then." And the person at the other end hung up.

Jacob dialed the number again. The phone rang and rang, but

there was now no answer. Finally he sat back and lit his pipe. He didn't enjoy it much.

"That was foolish, comrade," said the warden later, leading him back to his cell. "We listened to your phone call."

Jacob shrugged. "I've been a fool before," he said. "Why change things now?"

He tried to sleep, but it wasn't easy, knowing he was to die at dawn. He had neither watch nor window, and no idea when dawn was coming. Getting out of bed, he started to pace around the little room. He felt hungry.

"I should have asked for a last meal," he muttered. "I'd have had more pleasure from that."

Pacing and pacing, he grew hungrier and hungrier. "It must be breakfast time," he thought. "At least for those of us who have a full day ahead of us."

He thumped his fist on the cell door. "Hey, comrade!" he bellowed. "What time is it? Are you going to starve me to death to save the price of the firing squad?"

No one answered. He waited, banged again, and then went back to pacing. When he passed the cell door, he gave it a thump, just for something to do.

His hand was sore, and his legs so tired he thought he might go back to bed, when a faint voice cried, "Coming, brother!"

Someone banged at the other side of the door. Jacob turned toward it as he heard a click. He took a deep breath and prepared to die.

Instead, he found himself being hugged. "You are free, brother!" shouted a man Jacob had never seen before. "All political prisoners are to be freed!"

"Political . . ." Jacob began, but the man was too excited to listen.

"The Premier has fled the country, and all his government with him. Someone last night delivered boxes and boxes of such stuff to all the journalists that hardly a man or woman above the rank of dogcatcher has not been implicated in some scandal or another."

Jacob understood. "Oleander!" he whispered.

The man heard that. "What did you say, brother?"

"Er, I said, I said . . . Lulu? And her? Did Lulu go?"

"Who's Lulu, brother?"

"The Premier's daughter," Jacob replied.

The man took a step back. "You knew her, brother?"

"Er, well," Jacob replied, shuffling his feet and wondering how best to answer, "that's one reason I'm here."

The little man turned toward the door of the cell. "Hail, brothers!" he shouted. "Here's the man we want!"

Jacob's cell was filled in moments, and moments after that, Jacob found himself being deplorably bounced along on the shoulders of the mob. His identity was verified, and all were impressed to learn he had been sentenced to die at dawn. At dusk, he had been hailed as the new Premier. Lulu, who had given the mob her father's keys, and pointed out the key to the wine cellar, gave him her full endorsement.

Jacob never saw his tobacco pouch or his notebook again. In the confusion, they had probably been snatched up by some member of the crowd. He doubted that they would be much good to him any more. There was no time to be making phone calls anyway, with all these journalists pushing microphones at him.

"And what will be your first act as head of state, Mr. Premier?" one of them demanded.

Jacob thought about it. "There will be a decent pension plan for former border guards," he said. He saw no point in tempting fate.

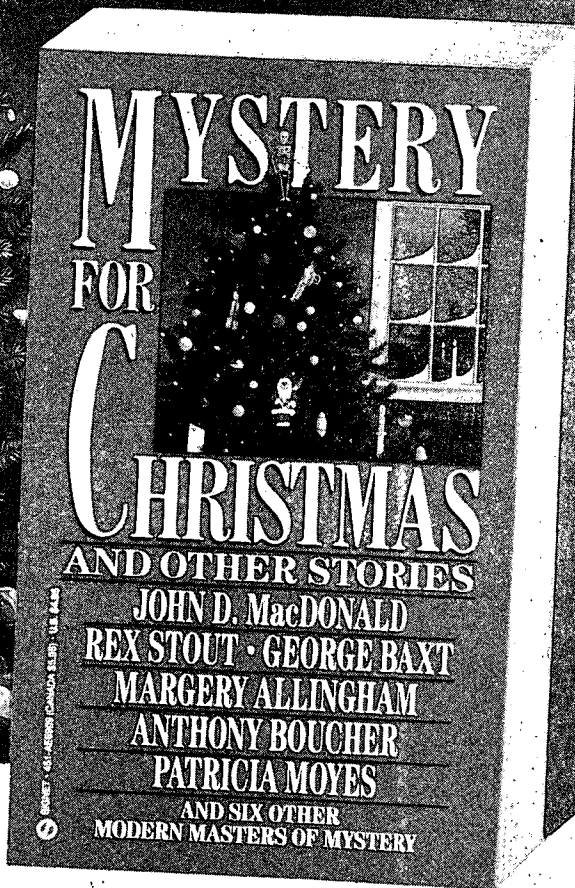
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ELIZABETH BEATTY

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

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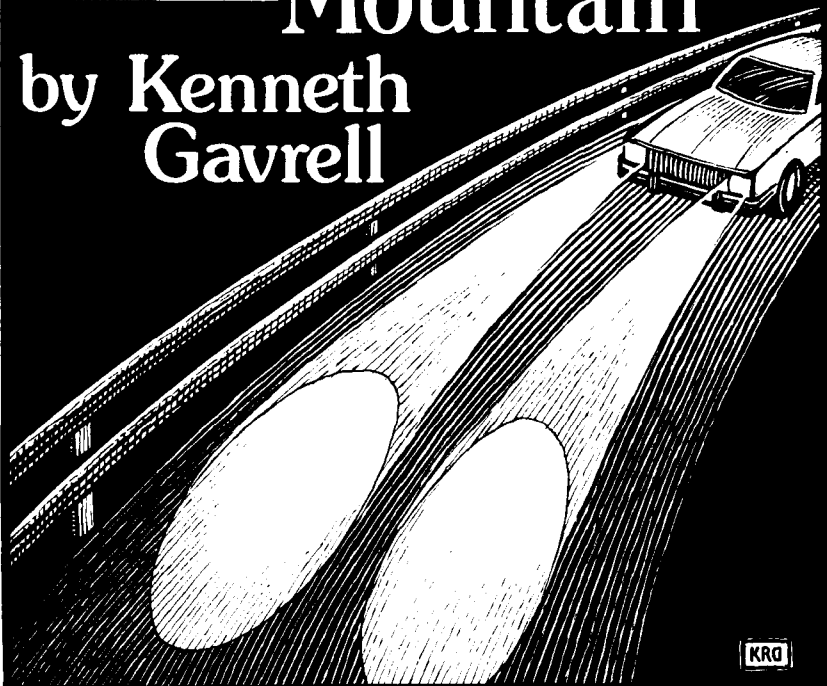
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36

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It was a modest, one story house in the Villa Nevarez section of San Juan. In the gated driveway crouched a metallic-green Buick that had fought a losing battle with the years of tropical sunlight. I parked in the street and let myself in through the open gate. I hadn't got three steps into the yard before a black mongrel that looked like one of Steven Spielberg's nightmares staged a surprise attack from the bushes below the windows. I kicked at him with feeling, and he stayed just outside the perimeter of destruction, snarling with bared yellow fangs and barking as only small dogs can.

The screen door to the house opened, and an old man in an undershirt yelled over the dog's racket to ask who I was. I told him, and he picked up a rock and threw it at the dog. The dog dodged the rock but kept up his snarling and barking as I edged past him towards the door. He almost got my ankle when I looked away for an instant. The old man let me in and banged the door in the cur's face.

"Francisco!" he yelled. "*Es el detective privado.*"

"*Sí, voy!*" replied an equally loud voice from somewhere in the back of the house.

"*Siéntese,*" said the old man. Have a seat.

I sank into a brown stuffed sofa while he grinned at me like

a Cheshire cat in need of serious dentistry. The dog had stopped barking. There was a minute of awkward but blessed silence. The old man sat down too and examined me with the impolite directness of age. He was perhaps seventy, but in pretty good shape except for his teeth. Spry, possibly mischievous, judging from the grin.

Another man of about forty swung into the living room from the hallway. He was short, plump, black-mustached, and wore blue slacks and a dress shirt rolled up at the wrists. He held out his hand.

"Francisco Martínez," he said.

I said I was glad to meet him and shook the plump hand.

He took a chair opposite me as the old man said: "*Es la primera vez que veo a un detective privado.*" It's the first time I've seen a private detective.

"There are quite a few of us around."

"Papa, don't you have something to do?" Francisco Martínez said.

"No, nothing," the old man answered.

He smiled. I smiled. The son released a sigh. His eyes looked very tired, as if he hadn't slept for days.

He began abruptly: "As I told you on the phone, my wife was shot to death a few days ago—last Saturday, to be exact. So far the FBI have come up with

nothing, and it doesn't look like they will."

"The FBI?" I interrupted.

"Lillian was murdered on federal property: El Yunque national forest preserve. You may have read about it in the newspapers."

I had read about it, and recited the details to him to see if they were substantially correct. The body had been found in the closed section of the mountain on Sunday morning. The Park Service had been led to it by the presence of a car parked overnight near the limit of the open section of the mountain road. There is supposed to be a road that crosses El Yunque mountain from the north coast to the Humacao valley, but about twelve years ago the southern section had been torn apart by a severe landslide, and for some reason it still wasn't repaired. So that, although the map showed a through route, anyone attempting to pass over the mountain was halted by a metal barrier near the mountaintop and forced to retrace the nine miles down to the coast. It had happened to me, which was why I knew about it.

On Sunday morning, when a park ranger noticed that the car had been sitting there all night with no one around, he initiated a search for the owner and they eventually found the body of Lillian Martínez. She

had been shot twice in the chest.

"Your memory is good," Francisco Martínez remarked.

"For certain things. What makes you think I can succeed where the FBI can't?"

"A friend of mine, Tito Ramos, recommended you highly. He said you always give your best."

"I try to. I've worked for Sr. Ramos on two occasions."

"Will you work on this case?" His eyes were almost pleading.

"All right, Sr. Martínez; but I'll need to know more. For instance, why would your wife have been on El Yunque last Saturday?"

He spread his hands, palms upward. "I don't know. It wasn't unusual for Lillian to be out on Saturday afternoons. I like to watch sports on TV and she usually goes—went—out with her girlfriends. But why El Yunque?"

"What sort of woman was Sra. Martínez?" I asked him.

He shrugged his rounded shoulders. "Normal. Very normal. She worked, took care of the house, liked to go shopping with her friends. Sometimes she went to the movies. There was nothing 'mysterious' about Lillian."

"Excuse me for asking, but did you get along well?"

"I think so. Of course, after fifteen years of marriage..." He left that dangling.

I prodded: "Yes?"

"Lillian was a warm, helpful, and generous person," he said flatly.

"Generous!" his father snorted. "*Caray!*"

I turned to the old man. He just regarded me impishly. I turned back to the son.

"Do you have any children?"

"One. Our daughter Evelyn. She's at school."

"How old is she?"

"Fourteen."

"Where did Sra. Martínez work?"

"At the Water Authority—the Rio Piedras office."

"Could she have been on El Yunque in connection with her work?"

"No," Martínez said. "Lillian was only a file clerk."

"You have *no* notion why she was up there?"

"No."

"Or who could have murdered her?"

"No." He put his hands over his face, but it didn't look like he was crying, only terrifically tired.

"I suppose you know my fee," I said, hoping my businesslike tone would keep him from falling apart on me.

"Yes," he said. "Twenty-five dollars an hour plus expenses. It's all right."

"I'll give you a strict accounting and keep you abreast of whatever I turn up. If I decide

it's a dead-end case, I'll tell you that too."

"I appreciate it," he said quietly.

I asked him for a good photo of his wife and for his home and work telephone numbers. I pocketed these, and he and the old man walked me to the door. Martínez remained at the door, but his father accompanied me across the front yard. Melvin the Mongrel was nowhere in sight.

"Women are made by the devil," the old man said suddenly. There was a lunatic leer on his face.

"What?"

"Evil—every one of them. The little one will turn out the same, you'll see. The Bible is full of examples."

"You read the Bible?"

"All the time. It is a history of the evil caused by women."

"Was Sra. Martínez evil?"

He treated me to his Cheshire cat smile and turned back to the house.

Since El Yunque rain forest was federal property, the FBI had primary jurisdiction in the case. I would have liked whatever information they had gathered, but I'd run into them once before on another case and I knew there wasn't a chance in hell of their sharing information with a humble P.I. like myself. How-

ever, I figured our common-wealth homicide division would have been kept apprised of developments, so as soon as I got back to my office I telephoned my friend Roberto Burgos at Hato Rey headquarters. He was in a cooperative mood, but about all he could give me that I didn't already have was the name of the park ranger who had found the deserted car and the facts that Lillian Martínez's purse with eighty dollars in it had been found in her car (motive apparently not robbery) and the autopsy had determined there was no sexual assault involved.

"Is it possible that Lillian Martínez was running around?" I asked him.

"Something like that is always possible," Roberto said, "but I've heard nothing to suggest it."

I thanked him and promised to buy him a hamburger.

"It's getting so you owe me a lot of hamburgers," he grumbled as he rang off.

I sat in the empty office—my part-time secretary, Maria, had left at noon—and studied the glossy photo on my unglossy desk top. Lillian Martínez had been a pretty woman with lightish hair and blue eyes. She was thirty-three but looked younger in the picture. It seemed a nice face, with a suggestion of sensuality in the full lips.

I took out a map of the island that I kept in my desk drawer. El Yunque National Forest comprised about forty-five square miles of thick, mountainous rain forest. It was a lot of uninhabited territory, perhaps a good place for lovers to go (if they had nowhere else to go). A fine place to hide a body so that it would never be found, but Lillian Martínez's body had been found in less than two hours. I decided that after lunch I'd take a drive out to El Yunque.

At two in the afternoon, traffic on Highway 3 was crawling through a labyrinth of reconstruction, and it took me almost an hour to reach the turnoff to the mountain. I wound up a narrow, curving road and eventually saw a broad wooden sign that informed me that I was entering the Caribbean National Forest. Right after that another sign pointed to the park offices on a road to the left. I swung up maybe fifty yards into the parking lot of a large building with American and Puerto Rican flags flanking the entrance.

Just inside the doors, I almost collided with a woman in her fifties wearing a Forest Service uniform who asked me if she could be of assistance. I identified myself and explained why I was there. I asked if Officer Torres, the man who had

found Sra. Martínez's car, would be around.

She checked a duty roster they had on the wall. "You're lucky," she said. "He begins the four to twelve shift today."

I checked my watch: it was just short of three o'clock. I told her I'd return in an hour. With time to kill, I walked the short distance down the road to a restaurant named La Montaña that I'd noticed outside the park entrance.

La Montaña was a Spanish style place with oiled wood walls and a stone fireplace. It had a fancy leather-lined bar and a brightly lit saltwater fish tank that I wouldn't have minded in my living room. The walls sported leather wine bags and ancient-looking swords and guns. Except for one young man mopping the tile floor and another working behind the bar, there was only an elderly couple in the place, sipping margaritas at a corner table. I planted myself on a barstool and ordered a Beck's beer.

The bartender brought the beer and went back to polishing glasses.

"Not much business today," I observed.

"Not at this hour," he said.

"You worked here long?"

"About a year."

"Were you here on Saturday, the day the woman was shot on the mountain?"

He gave me a keen look before replying. "As a matter of fact I was."

I pulled out the photo of Lillian Martínez and nudged it across the bar. "This is her picture. Did she stop in here by chance?"

He studied the pretty face dutifully.

"No," he said.

"You're sure? Maybe she was with someone."

"She didn't come in here," he said definitively. "You a cop?"

"Private detective. My name's Carlos Bannon. The dead woman's husband hired me."

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't see her."

"What do you think could have happened up there?" I asked.

He smiled. "Well, some people would say it has to do with the flying saucers."

"Oh?" I said.

"You know, there've been quite a few flying saucer sightings around El Yunque. A lot of strange things."

I sipped my beer. "Do you have any other theories?"

"Maybe it isn't that far-fetched," the young comedian said. "Some people wonder if these 'flying saucers' may have something to do with the government. A secret project or something like that. The road closed for about twelve years.

It doesn't take twelve years to repair a road after a landslide."

"What kind of government project?"

"Well, some people think they're training guerrillas, some people think it's a NASA or Air Force project, and some think it's CIA stuff."

"What do you think?"

"I think there's a broken road up there," he grinned.

"Why hasn't it been repaired?"

"Could be they don't care enough to spend the money. Or it could be it got lost in the red tape of the bureaucracy."

I drained my glass and ordered another. "You know," I said, "if you ever get tired of tending bar, you might try stand-up comedy. That deadpan stuff is in nowadays."

"Thanks for the tip," he said.

I got back to the park offices at five to four. Torres had just arrived. The uniformed woman pointed him out to me: a tall, well-built man with brown skin and tight jaw muscles. I introduced myself and showed him my license. I offered him a cigarette and he accepted.

"If you could show me where her car was parked and where they found her body . . ."

"You say you were hired by the dead woman's husband?"

"Yes. It's having a terrible effect on him—not knowing why or how she died."

"I can imagine," Torres said. "I've been married twenty-one years myself. You married?"

"I was," I said. "I'm divorced."

"Too bad," he said, shaking his head. "Okay, let's go up."

We jumped into his Jeep and he shoved her into gear and climbed fast up the tight, hair-pinned road. The temperature became perceptibly cooler, and I could feel the pressure change in my ears. We passed a tall white waterfall which a sign identified as Coca Falls, then a round rust-red observation tower with two walkie-talkied park officers outside. The vegetation became more ferny, rain-forestry, and the sky greyer until we were driving through a fine, cool drizzle.

Nearer the top, Torres pointed out the squat, wooden Information Center, which looked lonely in the rain, and beyond that the park restaurant. We continued grinding uphill until we were suddenly stopped by the metal bar-gate that blocked the road. Torres skidded off to the side and cut the Jeep's motor. There was nothing around except another road that cut off to the right, going downhill.

"You're going to get wet," Torres said.

"I don't mind."

"Do you have another cigarette?" he asked.

I passed him my pack; we both lit up.

"You see there?" he pointed to the cutoff road. "Her Pontiac was parked just down there off the asphalt."

"Where does that road go?"

"It circles back to this one just below."

"Is it unusual to have cars parked on the mountain overnight?"

"Campers can park in designated areas. This car hadn't been checked in as campers."

"Why didn't you investigate it earlier?"

"If I did that with every car parked up here, I wouldn't be doing anything else. This is a favorite place for lovers."

"Where was the body?" I asked.

"That's a short walk," he said. "Come on."

I had trouble keeping up with the stride of Julio Torres. Twenty-one years of marriage hadn't slowed him down any. Neither did mud or heavy vegetation or thorns or insects. He looked in his element. Five minutes of walking at his brisk pace brought us to an area that was fairly clear of high vegetation but covered with thick scrub—a kind of clearing beyond a ridge that separated it from sight of the road.

"I'm told there are rumors of a secret government project somewhere up here," I said matter-of-factly.

"Mierda," said Torres.

"What was the weather like that night?"

"Heavy rain on and off all night."

He pointed to a place that had been marked off on the ground with stakes and cord. "The body was exactly there. Two .38 slugs, both in the chest. She'd been dead for at least ten hours when we found her."

"Were there footprints?"

"There probably were earlier, but the rain had washed them away by the time we found her. The slope would take care of that."

"What are those marks?" I asked, pointing to a spot about ten yards from where the body had been found.

Torres strode over to examine them. "Can't say. Could be natural, I suppose."

There were three indentations in the earth, the edges washed smooth by the rains.

"They don't look natural to me," I said.

"Maybe somebody was digging here once upon a time."

"For what?" I asked.

"Couldn't say. They're not very deep. You have another cigarette?"

I passed the pack.

"Got a light?"

I passed him my lighter. He exhaled blue smoke and said: "They found the two spent cartridge cases, so this is where she was shot."

"Was it at very close range?"

"The FBI says no—some yards away."

"Well, one thing seems sure: whoever shot her either walked back down the mountain or had his own car."

"Looks that way," Torres agreed laconically.

"You didn't notice any other vehicle parked up here that night?"

"I spent most of my time around the camping areas or down at the main building," Torres said.

I said I'd seen what I needed, and we started back to the Jeep. By the time we reached it, I felt as soggy as a chewed cigar.

I got to the office early the next morning and read over a couple of reports Maria had typed up, signed them, and gave them back to her to have Raul deliver. I told her I'd be out running leads most of the day.

"If I have to get in touch with you?" she asked around her Doublemint gum.

"I'll call in at noon."

"You just want to make sure I don't leave early."

"There's that too," I agreed and waved farewell.

The Rio Piedras office of the Water Authority is in a one story cement building in a crummy back street near the university. Its small waiting area is always crammed with

distraught parishioners treated with courtly disdain by the one receptionist. You take a number and spend the day waiting for the honor of speaking to one of the customer service staff, hidden behind discreet partitions where they paint their nails and sip coffee. They have frequent long phone conversations with their boyfriends.

I politely asked the receptionist, a recent blonde with pink lipstick, who I could talk to concerning Lillian Martínez.

"*Policía?*" she asked, raising one eyebrow.

"*Detective privado.*" I showed her my identification. "Sra. Martínez's husband has hired me to investigate her death."

"The FBI have already been here."

"I'd like to talk to whoever was closest to Sra. Martínez."

She half shrugged her little shoulders, a movement she doubtless considered provocative, and said, "I guess that would be Stella. Just a minute."

She disappeared among the flimsy partitions. The waiting crowd eyed me evilly: why was I receiving special treatment? I smiled at them, friendlylike.

The receptionist returned, squiggled into her chair, and said, "The third desk on the right. Señorita Colon."

"*Un millón de gracias.*"

It was a tiny space, just large enough for the desk, two chairs,

and a wastebasket. At the desk sat a woman of about thirty in print slacks and a yellow blouse that looked as if it could be silk. When she spoke, her voice had a knowledgeable timbre:

"Have a seat, please."

"Thank you. My name is Carlos Bannon and—"

"You're investigating Lillian's death," she finished for me. "Carmen told me. What can I do for you?"

"I'm told you knew Sra. Martínez best here in the office."

"We were friends. We always had lunch together."

"Do you have any idea why she might have been killed, Miss Colon?"

"Well, Lillian wasn't into drugs or anything illegal like that. It came as quite a shock. And I'm not very easily shocked."

I could believe that. From her accent I guessed she'd spent some years in New York, which would toughen St. Francis of Assisi. I dropped my voice a trifle: "Would there have been a man involved with her?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a wild pitch. Something someone said to me yesterday."

"*Bien*, as a matter of fact . . ."

I felt my ears swing out from my head.

"... there was one." She seemed relieved to release the secret.

"Did you inform the FBI about this man?"

"No. When they came, I was on vacation in New York. I just got back yesterday."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes," she said, then added quickly, "but I'm sure he had nothing to do with it."

"How can you be sure?"

"He seemed a nice man. I met him once."

"Everyone seems nice on a first meeting. Will you give me his name?"

"I don't want to get into trouble," she said, wavering.

"You won't get into trouble. I'll keep your name out of it."

She still hesitated, then suddenly it burst from her lips like a bubble popping: "Angel González."

"Do you know where I might find him?"

"He runs a small trucking business on Avenida Kennedy. I think it's called Borinquen Trucking."

"Terrific," I said in English.

"Are you *norteamericano*? You speak Spanish perfectly."

"My father was from the States."

"That explains the funny name," she said.

"Yes. Do you think Sra. Martínez's husband knew that she was seeing another man?"

"No. Definitely not. If he had."

I waited. While I waited, the

implication of what she was saying dawned on her.

"No," she said, her head rapidly shaking denial. "If that were the case, he would not have hired you."

"Stranger things have been known to happen," I said. "Is there anything else you can tell me that might be of help, Miss Colon?"

"No," she said. "I've already told you too much."

"Is there someone else here who might be worth talking to?"

"Nobody knew Lillian as well as I did. She confided in me. Every woman needs someone to confide in."

"And most men," I added.

I thanked her for her time and walked out through the furious crowd in the waiting room.

Borinquen Trucking on Avenida Kennedy was a lightweight operation squeezed between a car dealership and a gas station. I swung in through their gate and parked beside the cinder block office building next to some other cars. I walked through double glass doors and found myself in a short hallway with another locked door blocking further entry. To my right, behind a large glass pane, a middle-aged woman sat at a desk puffing a cigarette. The pane had a little round hole to

allow the pleasure of speaking to her and a large rectangular hole below for deliveries. This placed believed in security.

I told the woman I'd like to talk to Sr. González. At that moment the inside door clicked open and a tall, heavysset man stepped out. He was about my age with a rugged face, longish hair, and a torso that bulged under his tight-fitting sport shirt. "I'm González," he said.

"Carlos Bannon." I passed him my license, which he scrutinized carefully.

"What can I do for you?" he said finally. He didn't sound anxious to do very much for me.

"Is there someplace more private we can talk?"

"Sure." He waved me ahead of him through the door and then led the way into another office with a nice view of the gasoline pumps next door and a big Puerto Rican flag on the wall above the wooden desk. González closed the door, dropped into the chair behind the desk, and gestured me into a vinyl armchair opposite. He leaned back and put one big foot up on the desk. He looked comfortable.

"Well? What's this about?"

"It's about someone who's been murdered, Sr. González. Her name was Lillian Martínez. You may have read about it in the newspapers."

I paused. González slowly

pulled out a pack of Marlboros, lit one, and eyed me silently through the smoke.

I plunged ahead: "A confidential source has informed me that you and Sra. Martínez were—good friends."

That dropped like a gas bomb in a bunker. He didn't make a move, didn't say a word. I was beginning to sweat around the collar.

"I have no interest whatever in your relationship with Sra. Martínez. As far as I'm concerned that's a peripheral matter and completely confidential. But I was hoping that you might be able to give me some information to help me with my investigation. Anything at all that could suggest a possible reason for Sra. Martínez's death."

González withdrew his foot from the desk and leaned forward in his swivel chair. He kept his eyes on my face, squinting slightly, while his left hand played with a little slip of yellow paper on the desk top.

"You take big chances," he said.

"I have to—it's part of my job."

"You carry a gun?"

"Sometimes."

"Right now?"

"No."

His hairy hand toyed with the paper.

"Lillian and I *were* good friends," he said evenly. Then, with what sounded like real sincerity, he repeated, "Very good friends."

"I'm sorry," I said.

He ran his hand across his eyes. Even gorillas have feelings. "When is the funeral?" he asked.

"I don't know. Her body's still at Forensic Medicine. I'm sure you'd like to see whoever murdered her apprehended."

"It was some *loco*," he said. "Some kid up on drugs."

"Sra. Martínez wasn't robbed," I said. "Her handbag was found in her car. Neither was she—" I tried to sound delicate "—sexually assaulted."

"I told you," González said. "Some *loco*."

"It's easier to solve a murder that has a motive," I said.

"What could be a motive?" González asked, his voice rising. "Lillian had no enemies that I ever heard of. *I* didn't do it."

"What about her husband?" I suggested.

"I assume he hired you. Why the hell would he do that if he killed her himself?"

"He did hire me," I said, lighting one of my own Camels. "Would you know if he owns a gun?"

"I think she said he does. Doesn't everybody?"

"I take it you do."

"Trucking can be a rough business, Sr. . . ."

"Bannon."

I could see he didn't much like the name.

"What are you—a *norte-americano*?"

I went through my usual spiel. Almost everybody asked that question.

"A true Puerto Rican wouldn't marry a gringo," he said.

I ignored the insult to my mother and asked casually, "Are you married?"

"No," he said, "not any more."

There was a sudden rap on the door, and González bellowed, "Come in."

The door opened to reveal a very attractive but vaguely masculine young woman carrying a clipboard. She wore a green jumpsuit that revealed healthy breasts and buttocks. Her complexion was milky coffee, her lips inviting, and her dark hair clipped shorter than González's. She definitely did things for my hormones.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said in a voice like the depths of a tropical sea, "but there's a hassle over the oranges in consignment."

"What kind of hassle?"

"They say they're not supposed to pay now."

"Like hell they're not," González snapped as he pushed to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said to me and vanished

through the door.

The girl fired her eyes at me as she pulled the door to. She had eyes that would melt marble.

I jumped from my seat, went behind González's desk, and pulled open its two drawers: a stapler, paper clips, pens and pencils, blank yellow notepads, and an unopened pack of Marlboros. No gun. I closed the drawers and perused his desk top; aside from the telephone and a dirty ashtray, there were a pair of mirror sunglasses, a cheap pen, a gold cigarette lighter, and a large stack of papers. I leafed through these. All of them were routine trucking documents, except for a little slip of yellow notepaper tucked underneath. It was the one González had been playing with, and scribbled on it in pencil was

Garza Azul

A.42

10:00

I slipped it back under the pile and returned to my chair.

I needn't have hurried; González didn't return for five minutes. When he did, he looked refreshed, as if he'd enjoyed his hassle.

He lit another cigarette. "Where were we?"

"We were trying to determine some motive for Sra. Martínez's death," I said.

"Some loco did it." He really liked that phrase.

"Let's assume for the moment that that's true," I said. "There still remains the question of why Sra. Martínez was up on El Yunque in the first place."

"Lillian liked to take long drives. She and her husband didn't get along too well. At least that's what she told me."

"Back to the husband," I said.

"He didn't know about us," Gonzalez said.

"How do you know?"

"I know. Lillian liked to take drives. She would go to places like the beach or some fishing village. This time it was El Yunque. It's beautiful up there. She wanted to get out of the house."

"And some nut with a .38 just decided to kill her," I concluded.

González punched out his cigarette. "I guess I can't help you, Sr. Bannon. I'm a little upset. I think you'd better not waste any more of your time."

I got up, and he led me to the outside door. We shook hands. I climbed in my car and headed for the nearest telephone book.

As I saw it, Angel González was my prime suspect, and Angel González had a ten o'clock meeting, possibly tonight, at a place called *Garza Azul* or Blue Heron. I was very curious about who he was meeting and why.

It was a long shot, but it was about the only lead, if lead it was, that I had. So all I needed to do was locate the Blue Heron.

I sat in my stuffy office and wondered about the A.42 as I went through the San Juan commercial telephone book. I decided to start the easy way and checked the general listings in the front. No Blue Heron anything there.

Next I tried the restaurant listings, although I would have been surprised if there was a restaurant in town I hadn't heard of. No Blue Heron.

I turned to the nightclubs and bars, which seemed to offer a very good possibility. Another goose egg.

Where did that leave me? Hotels and guest houses. It was just the sort of cutesy name some guest house in the tourist section of Isla Verde might use. But it wasn't there either.

I took the rum bottle out of the file cabinet and poured myself three fingers. I needed inspiration. The rum tasted fine, but it didn't provide much inspiration.

There was no theater in town called the Blue Heron. It could be a movie title. I grabbed the copy of the San Juan *Star* that Maria left on my desk each morning and found the movie section. No movie named *The Blue Heron* was listed in any of the island theaters.

I finished the rum while I stared at the opposite wall. It could use a paint job. A different color, though, not that pearl grey. I got up to replenish my inspiration.

The phone rang. It was Francisco Martínez.

"Since you hadn't called, I thought I might get in touch with you to see how things were going."

"I think they're going," I said, "but very slowly. Did you ever hear of a place called the Blue Heron?"

"No," he said. "Why?"

"Just something I ran across. It may not be a lead."

"It sounds like a nightclub or a movie title," Martínez said.

"I already tried those. Well, forget about it. Look, Sr. Martínez, I went up to El Yunque yesterday and talked to the forest ranger who found your wife's car. I also looked at the scene of the murder. Today I checked where she worked and talked to a couple of acquaintances of hers."

"And?"

"And no one seems to know why she was up there on Saturday or why she might have been killed. She doesn't seem to have had enemies."

"I told you that."

"I know. It's been suggested that some homicidal nut who didn't even know your wife might have done it."

"Does that seem likely to you?" Martínez asked.

"Possible, but not likely," I said.

"What will you do next?"

"Have a drink. If I turn up anything of interest this afternoon, I'll let you know."

"I'll be at home all evening," he said.

I rang off and leaned back and inhaled my second drink. Cows ruminate on grass, Carlos on rum. Clever pun. But not as clever as the next idea I had. I pulled out my address book and looked up the number of Harry Munsen, a friend of mine who works at Coast Guard headquarters in Old San Juan.

"I need a favor," I said.

"I like the way you begin, Carlos. Not how are you, not how's the wife and kids, just 'I need a favor.' You should have been a diplomat."

But he agreed to do me the favor and get back to me as soon as he could.

His call came fifteen minutes later.

"You were right," Harry said.

"There is a boat—a seventy-five foot yacht—named the *Blue Heron*. It's registered to Eladio Valle Cancel and berthed at the Arena Blanca Yacht Club."

He paused, as if expecting some reaction from me.

"I should know Eladio Valle Cancel?"

"Where do you live, on the

moon? He's a millionaire. He owns Helio Air Services in Isla Verde and a string of other businesses. He has a house—some people would call it a mansion—in the hills just west of El Verde. Why are you interested in his boat?"

"I'm working on the murder of that woman last Saturday on El Yunque. I ran across a reference to a Blue Heron."

Harry gave a low whistle. "Watch your ass," he said. "Valle has all kinds of powerful connections. He could have you drawn and quartered."

"What else do you know about him?"

"He's not young—about seventy. An eccentric, an art collector. Married, but he's almost never seen in public with his wife. A strong supporter of Puerto Rican independence. When he was younger, he was a notorious playboy."

"But now that he's old, he's got religion."

"There are still some rumors about a taste for young women. But he lives like a hermit up on his hill. They say the place is a palace, just as eccentric as he is."

"Can you tell me how to get to the palace?"

"You must be the only one in Puerto Rico who doesn't know where it is," Harry said. He gave me the directions.

"Do you think Valle's phone

would be listed?"

"Are you serious? The only way you'd get his phone number would be—maybe—through the police."

"Well, thanks a million, Harry."

"Watch your ass," he said again as he hung up.

I telephoned Roberto Burgos at Homicide. He was out, but they expected him back shortly. I left a message for him to call me at my office. I sat there twiddling my thumbs and wiggling my toes and staring at the telephone. It rang twenty minutes later. "Bannon here."

"Carlos, this is Harry again."

"What's up, Harry?"

"You said you were working on that case of the murdered woman on El Yunque. Well, listen to this. One of our copters chased another one over the east coast last Friday night. We had a tip, but it turned out to be a dud."

"I don't see—"

"Listen. The copter we chased was piloted by a P.O. Sanchez and belongs to Helio Air Services. It flew right over El Yunque before we forced it down."

"Well, well."

"It could be just a coincidence," Harry Munsen said. "You believe in coincidences?"

"I prefer not to. What was your dud tip on the copter?"

"Aha," Harry said.

It was all coming together: two connections are no coincidence. I poured myself another drink to celebrate my two connections. While I was still savoring it, Roberto Burgos' return call came. He'd just got in from a homicide scene in Santurce.

"And how is your investigation going?" he asked, half sarcastically.

"I found Lillian Martínez's boyfriend."

"So she *was* running around. You have good instincts, my friend."

"I'm not going to give it to the FBI."

"Why not?"

"I more or less told him I wouldn't. But he does look like the most likely suspect. He's got some connection with a millionaire named Eladio Valle. You ever hear of him?"

"Of course I have. One of those aging skirt-chasers."

"Can you get me his phone number? It's not listed."

"You think he'd talk to you?"

"I'd like to give it a try. I'm curious to see his palace in the hills."

Roberto chuckled. "Hold on a minute."

It was more like several minutes before he returned with the number and read it to me.

"How much are you holding back on me, Carlos?"

"What makes you think I'm holding anything back?" I asked.

He chuckled again. "Well, let me know how it turns out."

I said I would, rang off, and dialed Valle's palace. Some servant answered. I identified myself and asked to speak to Sr. Valle. The woman asked what my business was with Sr. Valle. I said I would have to speak directly to Sr. Valle. The woman told me to wait.

I crossed my fingers. In a minute, to my amazement, Valle's voice came on.

"Sr. Valle," I said, "excuse my calling you like this—I know you're a busy man—but I am investigating the unfortunate death of a Sra. Lillian Martínez on El Yunque last Saturday night. Her husband requested that I pursue the investigation."

"Yes, what has this to do with me?" he asked.

"Nothing, most likely. But your name did come up in a very tangential way. I was wondering if I might come out to see you, just for a short while."

At this point he should have told me to go to hell and banged down the receiver. If he was uninvolved. But he didn't do that. Instead he said, "Well, I can't see how my name could possibly have come up. I never heard of the woman. But you have piqued my curiosity, Sr. Bannon. You surely have. I'll be here at home all afternoon." "I should be there in about an

hour," I said. "Thank you very much, Sr. Valle."

"*Hasta luego*, Sr. Bannon," he said.

His voice had sounded old, refined, and slightly ironic. The voice of a man who was in control of things and had been in control of things for a long time. An interesting man; a man who had either a healthy curiosity or something to be afraid of.

I opened my desk drawer and took out the fully loaded Browning BDA 380 that was always there. I strapped on the gun and covered it with a lightweight sports jacket that hung on the lower knob of my window louvers for such occasions. Then I walked out to my Nissan and aimed it in the direction of El Verde.

I took Route 3 again, this time as far as Loíza, then turned south on 958 and climbed into the hills. The traffic disappeared, and I saw cows and chickens, snowy egrets, and rolling countryside. It had showered recently, and now the white sun glittered off the newly wet roofs and the leaves and grass. I lost my soft-rock radio station before I made the last turn according to Harry Munsen's directions. Eladio Valle's hermitage should be about half a mile up this road.

It had an electric gate, of course. I could see the house on

the hill above the trees. I didn't much care for it; it looked as if it had been designed by someone who couldn't decide whether he wanted to build the Taj Mahal or Monticello. While I was wondering how I was going to get through the security gate, I heard a male voice on an intercom system say, "*Es Usted, Sr. Bannon?*"

"Sí," I yelled toward the gate.

It slowly rumbled open, and I drove up a straight drive flanked by royal palms to the lofty front door. A servant in a dark suit was waiting at the open door and led me through a hallway into a huge, bright sitting room done in blues, whites, and creams.

A powerful looking young man with collar-length blond hair sat in a cream-colored easy chair facing the door. Behind him, a tall, slender man stood looking out one of the picture windows with his back to me. As I entered, the tall man turned and assessed me from head to foot.

"You look like a private detective," he said.

"You've seen others, Sr. Valle?"

"Oh, yes. I've had them work for me on occasion." He indicated the seated man with one slender finger: "This is one of my trusted employees, Sr. Sanchez."

Sanchez looked more like a

bodyguard to me, but I remembered the name: a P.O. Sanchez had piloted the intercepted helicopter.

Sanchez nodded, but didn't bother to get up. Neither one of them indicated any desire to shake my hand. Valle was wearing a silver-grey shark-skin suit that matched his carefully combed hair and that probably cost more than my car. He moved from the window with the grace and self-assurance of money.

"As I said on the phone, you've piqued my curiosity, Sr. Bannon. You say that *my* name came up in connection with one of your investigations?"

"Yes. A woman named Lillian Martínez was shot to death in a deserted part of El Yunque last Saturday night. I've interviewed several people; one of them said she might be an acquaintance of yours."

"I'm afraid he was wrong. It was a he?"

"No, another woman."

"Might I be allowed to know her name?"

"I'm afraid that has to remain confidential."

Sanchez stirred in his chair like a waking cobra.

"In any case," I said, "since she was wrong, it makes no difference. But coincidentally, I've also learned of a Coast Guard report that a helicopter belonging to your Helio Air Services

was pursued by them over more or less the same area on Friday night."

Valle threw back his silver head and laughed shortly. "And?" he asked ironically.

"I was wondering if you could tell me why the Coast Guard intercepted your helicopter."

"Because they were acting on false information," Valle replied smoothly.

"What kind of false information?"

"Didn't the report say?"

"I didn't see the report—I was just told of it."

"It would appear that you've wasted your trip out here, Sr. Bannon. None of this has anything to do with your investigation."

"In my business, Sr. Valle, you never can be sure what might turn out to be relevant. Can you at least tell me where the Coast Guard got its erroneous information?"

"No, I cannot. They do not reveal the identity of their informants. I suppose that if they did, they wouldn't have any informants. Believe me, Sr. Bannon, you are, as they say in English, 'spinning your wheels.'"

"I thought as much," I said affably. "But I felt that I should check it out."

"Commendable thoroughness," said Valle.

"Just out of curiosity," I said,

"where was the helicopter coming from?"

"It was returning from delivering some industrial machinery to the island of Montserrat," Valle said. He regarded me with an expression that suggested he was trying hard to hold back more laughter.

"This is quite a house," I said. "It was worth the trip to see it."

"It was designed by the great Emilio Rullan, who died about a year ago. Come, I'll give you a brief tour."

Sanchez joined us; he wasn't letting me out of his sight. I was certain he was wearing a gun under his jacket.

It wasn't a house, it was a museum. There was one room where all of the furniture was valuable antiques; another was an art gallery full of originals—I recognized the names of several of the painters. He had a "medieval room" with swords, halberds, crossbows, a suit of armor, and even a genuine chastity belt. He also had a large library of "erotic" literature, as he termed it; I glanced at some of the titles and it looked like common smut to me.

"You enjoy this sort of reading?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Valle said urbanely. "As one gets older . . ."

He didn't finish his sentence. He showed me a couple more rooms—relatively normal ones—and then led me back to the

sitting room. On the way he motioned to one door that he said led to the largest private wine cellar on the island. Eladio was not a humble man.

Sanchez trailed along through all this without a word. He looked like the kind of hotshot pilot who'd enjoy leading the Coast Guard on a merry goose chase over El Yunque at night. He didn't look very bright.

"As you said, you may now feel your trip was worthwhile," Valle remarked.

"I appreciate the tour. By the way, how does *Sra.* Valle feel about your 'erotic' collection?"

"I wouldn't know. My wife and I haven't spoken to each other in years."

I was amazed at his frankness.

"Well, don't feel bad," I said. "There are more marriages like that than people admit."

"Thank you for being so solicitous about my feelings, Sr. Bannon," he said stiffly. He was fuming, but too proud to show it.

A servant, already standing in wait, led me to the front door. In that house they seemed to communicate by mental telepathy.

At seven that evening I called my girlfriend Raquel before driving over to Francisco Martínez's house. The vicious cur in his

yard went for me again, but I managed to get past him with my pants intact. Martínez opened the door in Bermuda shorts and a tennis shirt. He offered me a drink and I took it.

"Well?" he asked hopefully.

"I've come up with a few names," I said. "I don't know if they mean anything. Did you ever hear of a P.O. Sanchez—a helicopter pilot?"

"No," he said.

"What about Eladio Valle?"

"The Eladio Valle?"

"That's the one."

"Of course I've heard of him, but I doubt he had anything to do with Lillian. How would she know a millionaire?"

Now for the big one. "Have you heard of an Angel González?"

I watched his face carefully. It didn't register anything in particular when he responded:

"The only Angel González I know is six years old, the son of a friend of mine."

"Do you own a gun, Sr. Martínez?"

"Yes, I do." Suddenly he grimaced. "Surely you don't think..."

"No, I don't, but it's the sort of question one has to ask under the circumstances. Where is the gun?"

"The FBI have it. Since it's a .38 caliber, they're running what they called a 'routine

check." He drained the amber liquid in his glass. "Any man who doesn't own a gun in San Juan these days is crazy."

"A lot of people seem to feel that way."

Martínez got up to freshen his drink and asked if I wanted a head on mine. I declined. When he returned from the kitchen, he asked if I'd located the Blue Heron we'd talked about on the phone. I said I thought I had, but I'd be sure later tonight. He seemed to accept that partial answer. He asked if I thought that some stranger, some homicidal maniac, had murdered his wife. I said that was looking less and less likely.

At this point Martínez's daughter Evelyn came in. She had been out shopping, judging from the plastic bags. I was surprised at how much she looked like her mother, with the same light hair and blue eyes. We exchanged glad-to-meet-you's.

I told Martínez I'd keep him informed and rose to leave. From another room, I heard the old man, Martínez's father, cursing in a very audible undertone. From what I could gather, his son had told him to stay there during our talk and the old guy wasn't any too happy about it.

I didn't go there alone. I took my bright and beautiful Raquel along; she is also a detective,

albeit for an agency, and knows how to handle a gun.

I explained as much as I knew during the drive to the Torrecilla Lagoon. It was nine thirty when we reached the gate of the Arena Blanca Yacht Club. A uniformed guard strolled to the passenger window to look us over. I told him we were invited to a yacht party. Raquel giggled and flirted with him as if she were five sheets to the wind. He smiled and asked whose yacht. Sr. Pedro Cruz, I replied promptly.

Clearly the name meant nothing to him, but there must have been two hundred boats at the bottom of the hill, gleaming against the still water of the lagoon.

Raquel giggled again and said, "*Adelante a la fiesta!*" On to the party!

The guard waved us through with an amused expression.

I drove down to the parking area. As I cut the motor, we did hear a noisy party going on in one of the boats. We started along the planked docks.

"What number did you say it was?" Raquel asked.

"The yellow paper said A.42. I took the A to mean *amarra-dero* or berth."

"Sounds very logical to me," she said. She pointed to a stenciled black number on the plank near our feet. "This one is four teen."

We move ahead until we saw a twenty-eight on one side of a pier that reached out into the dark lagoon and an eighty-eight on the other. "It's out there," Raquel said.

We walked out the wide pier. Tall yachts bobbed on either side. A very soft sea scented breeze came off the water. We found the stenciled 42 in front of a beautiful blue and white powerboat that stretched away from the pier like a ranch house. On its stern, painted in a semi-circle, were the words *Garza Azul*. It looked serene and lonely, sitting on the oily water.

"I think I'll become a socialist," Raquel said enviously.

The stern of the yacht was close enough to the high pier to allow us to climb its ladder easily, and we did.

"What time is it?" I asked Raquel.

"Twenty to ten. Are you sure there's no one here?"

"Do you see any lights? They haven't arrived yet."

"Are you sure it's ten o'clock tonight?"

"No."

We leaned against the boat's wall and listened to the rhythmic creaking that surrounded us; it sounded like the respiration of a dying man. We could hear the party farther down the docks. I lit a cigarette, inhaled it twice, and buried it at sea.

"Don't be afraid to use your gun if necessary," I said to her.

"I won't."

I put my arm around her shoulders. Perhaps fifteen minutes passed before she said:

"Look up there."

Two pairs of headlights were coming down the hill from the yacht club entrance. They turned towards us and parked as close to our pier as the parking lot would allow. The lights died and we heard voices.

"Looks like they arrived at the same time," I said.

Then we saw a group of figures separate itself from the two vehicles and move in our direction. We scrambled for cover near the bow of the boat.

"I don't like it," Raquel said. "There are more than two of them."

As the group approached, I made out four figures. Two of them were carrying a large object between them. They halted at the stern of the *Garza Azul*, and the two carrying the heavy object hauled it up on deck. The others waited on the pier while the pair returned to the vehicles twice more to bring aboard two identical rectangular objects. Then all four climbed aboard, and a tall, thin silhouette, who appeared to be in charge, led the way through a door into which people and objects disappeared.

That was when Raquel started breathing again. "It looks like you were right. What do we do now?"

"I'd love to hear what they're saying."

"I'd love to stay alive. There are four of them."

"Eladio Valle and his helicopter pilot P.O. Sanchez, Angel González and his girl Friday in the jumpsuit."

"She moves like a man," Raquel said, "in spite of her figure."

A light came on in a cabin just to our left. I got down on my hands and knees and edged to the Plexiglas. Inside I saw the quartet I had named. Valle seemed to be doing most of the talking, but I couldn't make out the words clearly.

"You stay right here," I whispered to Raquel. "I'm going inside to eavesdrop."

"Why don't we just call in the boys in blue," she suggested.

"I'll be careful. Keep your eyes on them."

I catfooted to the stern doorway and glided down a narrow, low-ceilinged hall past several closed doors to the partly open one with the light and the voices. A storage recess next to the door allowed me to hear clearly, though I could only see Angel González sprawled in a low chair and behind him the figure of his pretty employee.

"... a mistake," Eladio Valle's voice said. "In fact, two mistakes: the Martínez woman and taking the crates to my house. But at least one of them is rectified."

The surly voice of P.O. Sanchez cut in: "I think they were all right in the wine cellar."

"And I think we got them out just in time, with a private detective snooping around," Valle said.

"He doesn't know anything," Angel González said.

"He knew about the helicopter," Valle said. "That's why he came to see me this afternoon."

"Maybe he's better than I thought," González admitted.

"As I said," Valle continued, "two mistakes. The woman should not have been shot. That was your error, Sanchez."

"What else could I do? She'd followed Angel up the mountain. She saw everything. There was no other way."

"We could have scared her into silence."

"I don't know," González put in. "She was sure I was going out with Iris. That's why she followed me. She was crazy with jealousy."

"We could have kept her quiet," Valle repeated.

"She would have blown the whistle just to get even with me," González said. "I told her a week ago I didn't want to see

her any more."

I had a fire extinguisher goosing me and tried to squirm into a less uncomfortable position. As I shifted my right arm, something crashed to the floor. I didn't even look to see what it was; instead I pulled out my Browning and banged into the room. By now they were all on their feet. Angel González went for the gun in the back of his pants, and I fired a round into his leg just as I heard a second shot and saw Raquel's pistol poke through a new hole in the Plexiglas window. She hadn't hit anyone, but she had her gun trained on P.O. Sanchez's stomach. His hand was frozen halfway to his shoulder holster.

Apparently Valle and the girl were unarmed. Angel González was on the floor holding his leg and writhing. I called to Raquel to keep her gun on Sanchez while I ran to the fallen González and wrenched the stubby revolver from his beltline. I threw it out the doorway and backed away with the Browning on Valle and the girl. Valle still looked nonplussed. The girl was wearing a provocative sneer. While Raquel held her bead on Sanchez's stomach, I removed the .38 automatic from his shoulder holster. Then I gathered the three that were standing into a neat packet over the groaning González.

I was tempted to search the wench in the jumpsuit, but instead I told Raquel to make the phone call.

The interrogations took the rest of the night, but by then we were able to paste most of it together.

Valle was the backing for a small paramilitary terrorist group called the SDI, *Sueño de la Independencia*. His helicopters were used to smuggle in weapons from Montserrat which had previously been brought there from Cuba. Apparently someone in Montserrat (the Coast Guard never told us who) had provided a tip about Friday's shipment, and the Coast Guard had given chase to the copter. But jaunty P.O. Sanchez had brought her down very low and dumped the three coffin-like crates of fully automatic submachine guns on the west-facing slope of the clearing I'd

visited on El Yunque, out of sight of the pursuing helicopter. The spot was easy to mark because of the nearby lights at the end of the road.

The next night Angel González and Iris went up in his car to find the weapons. Sanchez was already there with a pickup truck. At just the time they'd located the boxes, Lillian Martínez burst out of the brush yelling something about how she'd get even with González. Without even thinking about it, Sanchez jerked out his trusty .38 and shot her. They carried the guns to the pickup and drove them out to Valle's mansion in El Verde.

Thanks to the fact that they had left Lillian Martínez's body on that rainswept slope, the case had not turned out to be a dead end. This was no consolation at all to her husband when I went to visit him at nine in the morning.

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FICTION

The Investigation —of Things— —by Charles Ardai—



"The extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things."

—Ta Hsueh, *The Great Learning*

Ch'eng I sat in the Grove of the Ninth Bamboo studying tea. He had twenty-four varieties on a great wooden palette, spread out before him like a portrait artist's paints. Each was labeled with meticulous calligraphy and kept in place by a bit of paste. Ch'eng I noted the subtle variations in the contours and textures of the leaves, labeling salient points directly on the wood with a fine-point brush.

Next to him, his brother, Ch'eng Hao, sipped from a teacup and watched in silence.

Ch'eng I selected a pouch from among the twenty-four at his feet. He pulled out a pinch of tea and spread it on his palette, separating the leaves with the end of his brush. "You see, brother," he said without looking up from his task, "the lung-ching is flat, like the edge of a fine sword, and slick, like wet hair."

"It tastes excellent," Ch'eng Hao said, tossing back the last of his tea, "not at all like wet hair. Beyond that I know nothing. What else matters about tea? How it tastes, whether it pleases one, that is all. You are not a tea farmer, to worry about the plant. You are not Lu Yu, to write another *Ch'a Ch'ing*. You ruin your eyes peering at tea when you should be drinking it."

Ch'eng I pulled a pinch from another pouch and spread it on his board. "Pi lo-chun dries in a spiral. It is the smallest of all the teas I have examined." He scratched a few more notes onto the wood, then laid the brush aside and looked up at his brother. "Please try not to be so selfish. Tea is not merely a flavor in your mouth. Tea exists even if your mouth does not. You must not understand tea in terms of yourself. You must understand yourself in terms of tea."

Ch'eng Hao shook his head. "You do not understand yourself. You do not understand tea. You spend your days picking things apart, but there will always be more things than there are days. Your tea, your pouch, your brush, your tunic—these are all tools. You shouldn't study them. You should use them: drink your tea, write with your brush, wear your tunic. When you sit down to think, you should think about *this*." Ch'eng Hao tapped a finger against his forehead.

Ch'eng I gathered his materials, wrapping the palette in its silk case and stringing the pouches along his belt. "No, brother, you are mistaken." He tapped his head. "This is the tool. You should use it to think about this—" He swept his free hand around him in an open gesture. "About this—" He lifted one of the pouches and let it fall to his side again. "And this—" He ran his hand along the trunk of a tree. "Grow until your mind is the size of the world. Do not try to compress the world to make it fit inside your mind."

"But there is more in the world than you can ever hope to know," Ch'eng Hao said.

"So you would argue that I shouldn't try to know anything?"

"I say only, as Chuang Tzu says, that 'to pursue that which is unlimited with that which is limited is to know sorrow.' The world

is huge; we are small and have short lives."

"When did you become a Taoist," Ch'eng I said, "that you quote Chuang Tzu?"

"Not a Taoist, I, a realist." Ch'eng Hao tried to wave the whole discussion away. "You will have to learn this for yourself. It is at least possible for one to fully understand oneself. That is a finite task. Through this understanding, one can understand everything else in the world."

"No, brother. The *Great Learning* says that self-perfection must come from the Investigation of Things, not the Investigation of Self."

"All things can be found in the self," Ch'eng Hao said.

"Now," said Ch'eng I, "you sound like a Buddhist."

"If you weren't my brother," Ch'eng Hao said, "I would demand an apology."

"If I weren't your brother," Ch'eng I said, "I might give you one."

Ch'eng Hao was about to answer when a scuffle of footsteps arose and a messenger burst into the grove. The messenger bowed deeply. The two brothers returned the courtesy, their argument temporarily set aside.

"Forgive me, please, for intruding," the messenger said, "but you are the brothers Ch'eng, are you not? Hao and I?"

Ch'eng I nodded. "We are."

"Then you must come. The Seventh Patriarch has requested your presence."

The brothers exchanged surprised glances. The Seventh Patriarch was the leader of the district's Ch'an Buddhist temple, and rarely one to invite outsiders into his sanctuary. Especially Confucian outsiders.

"He wants to see us?" Ch'eng Hao said. "Why?"

The messenger tried to look Ch'eng Hao in the eye and failed. His eyes fell to the ground and remained there, his chin pressed against his chest.

"What is it, man?"

The messenger spoke quietly: "There has been a murder."

The Temple of the Seventh Patriarch rose out of the flat land it was built on like a needle piercing upwards through a piece of fabric. It was a tower five times the height of a man, roughly pointed at the top, with walls of packed earth supported by wooden beams. The structure looked unstable and precarious, yet Ch'eng Hao knew that it was older than he was.

The messenger, who had identified himself as Wu Han-Fei, led them to the entrance and then stepped aside. "I may not enter," he said, in answer to the unasked question.

Ch'eng Hao and Ch'eng I stepped inside cautiously.

A body lay on its back on the ground, its feet toward them. It was clearly that of a Buddhist monk—there was no mistaking the coarse robe or the waxy pallor of the skin, so deathlike in life, how much more so in death! Ch'eng I knelt beside the corpse to examine it more closely while Ch'eng Hao looked around the inside of the room.

The neck of the monk's robe was soaked with blood—indeed, the entire front of the robe was. When he opened the robe, Ch'eng I discovered a ragged hole in the man's throat. He lifted the head and pulled off the hood. The monk's head was neatly shaved, as Ch'eng I had known it would be. The wound in his throat penetrated cleanly, ending in a round, puckered hole on the other side. The ground beneath the body was coated with blood; by now nearly dry, and the beams in the far wall were spattered with brown spots. Ch'eng I replaced the hood and laid the man's head back down.

Ch'eng Hao paced the room's perimeter. It was not a large room, though it took on a sense of space because of the high roof. Except for the body and themselves, the room was completely empty and devoid of decoration. There was no more mistaking a Ch'an meditation room than there was a Ch'an monk. Only prisons were this spare in the outside world . . . and graves.

Ch'eng I left the monk's body and walked over to the far wall, where the spray of blood had struck. He examined it closely, inching his way down from eye level until he stopped about two feet above the floor. He pulled his drawing brush from his belt and knelt to his work, using the handle to pry something from a tiny hole in the wall. Ch'eng I had to be careful not to break the brush, but he worked as quickly as he dared. Ch'eng Hao stood behind him, watching.

"What have you found?" Ch'eng Hao asked.

"I do not know yet. I will have to investigate." Ch'eng I scraped around the edges of the hole, coaxing out the object that was lodged inside. Finally, it fell to the ground and Ch'eng I picked it up. He tested it with a fingernail. "It is a piece of soft metal," he said, holding it out on his palm for his brother to see. It was a dark, flattened lump slightly larger than a cashew. Then he held up his thumbnail. "Coated with blood, as you can see. This little ball seems to have killed the unfortunate man at our feet."

"This ball?" Ch'eng Hao was incredulous. "How can that be?"

Ch'eng I stepped over to the open entryway. "Through here. It came in, struck the monk in the throat, and killed him."

"But that is impossible!" Ch'eng Hao said. "Think of the force required! Think how hard it would have had to have been thrown in order to pierce the man's neck!"

Ch'eng I shook his head. "It is worse than that. The metal was thrown with enough force to pierce the monk's neck and then continue its flight to the opposite wall, where it lodged itself three finger-widths deep. But you are wrong to say it is impossible. The evidence of our senses demonstrates that it has happened."

Ch'eng Hao looked at the bloody metal and at the corpse and said nothing.

Wu Han-Fei reappeared at the entrance. "The Seventh Patriarch will see you now," he said.

"Will he?" Ch'eng I took the murder weapon back from his brother and found an empty pouch for it on his belt. "How good of him." He left the temple. Ch'eng Hao followed.

Ch'eng I scanned the landscape more carefully than he had before. The temple was the only building in sight, surrounded at a distance of ten yards by a dense forest; it stood like an obelisk in the center of a flat and empty clearing. "Where will we find the Seventh Patriarch?" he asked.

"You will follow me," Wu Han-Fei said. He started off for the forest.

"Hold on," Ch'eng I shouted. Wu Han-Fei stopped and turned around. "I realize that we will follow you. What I asked is *where* we will find him, not *how* we will."

Wu Han-Fei was confused. "There." He pointed in the direction he had started to walk.

"In the forest?"

He shook his head. "In a clearing. Like this."

"How far?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "Not far. You will see."

"Yes, I imagine I will see. But first—"

"Never mind," Ch'eng Hao interrupted. "There will be plenty of time for your questions later." Then to Wu Han-Fei: "You will have to forgive my brother. He wants to know everything there is to know."

This explanation apparently satisfied the messenger, who turned around again and continued into the forest.

"I will not interfere with your investigation," Ch'eng I said as

they followed their guide, "and I will ask you kindly not to interfere with mine."

"Brother," Ch'eng Hao said, "if I hadn't interfered, you would still be badgering this poor man with your questions. You'd have kept at it until we all died of old age out there."

"Perhaps," Ch'eng I said. "Perhaps I would have found the truth sooner than that."

"The truth? You were asking him how far it was to where we are going! Of what possible consequence—"

"You think truth is limited to thought and reason and motive," Ch'eng I said calmly, "and that is a mistake. Truth is also distance, and size, and weight, and force. You can seek truth in your way. I will seek it in mine."

"Sirs," Wu Han-Fei interrupted. "We are here."

They had passed through about forty feet of dense forest and were now in another clearing. A dozen small buildings were clustered in the center. The messenger pointed to one of them. "You will find the Patriarch there."

"And you?" Ch'eng I looked closely at the man for the first time. This was no Buddhist—he had a fine head of long, black hair and a dark, earthy complexion; and if his robe was coarse it was due to poverty, not piety. Most telling, a respect for the public authority Ch'eng I and Ch'eng Hao represented was clear in the way he never met their eyes for more than a second; a devoted Buddhist would stare down the Emperor himself, even if it meant death.

"I will go no farther," Wu Han-Fei said.

"What are you doing here?" Ch'eng Hao asked, suddenly curious. "You are not one of them."

"No," Wu Han-Fei said. "I am their link with the secular world."

"I thought they did not need one," Ch'eng Hao said.

"They thought so, too." Wu Han-Fei spread his hands before him. "Murder changes such things."

"Tell me again," Ch'eng Hao said, "exactly how you found Kung." He paced as he spoke and did not turn to face the Patriarch when the old man answered.

"Kung was meditating," the Patriarch said. He had a voice that rumbled softly like a running stream. Ch'eng Hao was not insensible to beauty; he appreciated the sound of a wise and serene voice. But he listened with a suspicious ear to hear the silences, the words that remained unspoken. "Kung had grave matters on his conscience. Very grave."

"What were these grave matters?" Ch'eng Hao asked.

"Kung would not say." The Patriarch looked genuinely saddened by his monk's death, but Hao was aware that such apparent sadness might be no more than a mask. Men conceal, as he had often told his brother, in a way that nature does not. Honesty is a path only infrequently followed, and even then not without straying.

"Why would he not?"

The Patriarch caught Hao's eye and held it. "Ssu-ma Ch'ien was offered suicide but chose castration. He felt an honorable death would impair his mission on earth. So he sacrificed personal honor for the greater good."

"And . . . ?"

The Patriarch said nothing more.

"I want none of your *koans*," Ch'eng Hao said sharply. "Speak plainly or not at all."

"Silence is the sound of a man speaking plainly," the Patriarch said. And silence fell.

After the strained quiet had stretched out for a minute, Ch'eng I spoke. "It would be helpful if you would describe the circumstances under which Kung's body was discovered."

The Patriarch nodded. "Kung left for the temple early in the morning. Before an hour had passed, Lin-Yu came to see me. He told me that he had gone to the temple and found Kung's body, in the condition that you observed."

"Who might have killed him?" Ch'eng Hao asked.

"Any one of us," the Patriarch said, "myself included."

"Did you?"

The Patriarch favored Ch'eng Hao with a condescending smile. "I do not think so . . . do you?"

Hao shook his head. "No. Had you killed him you could easily have arranged to rid yourself of the body without any attention. The outside world is unaware of what goes on here—even apathetic. If I had an illustrious ancestor for every time someone has said to me, 'Let the monks starve to death; we do not care,' I would be the most favored man under heaven. You would have had no reason to ask us to investigate, for that could only call punishment down on your head. No, you did not kill Kung. But," and here Ch'eng Hao paused for a bit to let his words have their full effect, "I would be very surprised if you did not know why he was killed."

The old man shook his head. "Then I will have the pleasure of surprising you, Ch'eng Hao. For I know nothing of this matter beyond the fact that I was unfortunate enough not to be able to

prevent it. One of my men killed another: a son has murdered a brother. I want to know who and I want to know why."

"And how." This from Ch'eng I.

The Patriarch nodded slowly. " 'How' and 'why' are such similar questions, so fundamentally intertwined. You will not find one answer without the other."

"Then the investigation commences," Ch'eng I said. He stepped out of the room abruptly and headed toward the forest.

"If I might speak with the monks," Ch'eng Hao said, "all of them at once, it might give me the perspective necessary to understand the murderous act."

The Patriarch stood. "It shall be so."

Ch'eng I measured the distance from the edge of the forest to the temple, using his own footsteps for a standard. Forty paces brought him from the nearest trees to the entrance.

It was extraordinary, he thought, that such a thing was possible. For surely the attacker had concealed himself in the forest—Kung had been facing his attacker when he had been hit in the throat after all, and he would not have stood still had he seen that an attack was imminent. But for a pellet of metal, even a small one, to be propelled forty paces through the air, then through a man's neck, then for this pellet to penetrate three finger-widths deep into a solid earthen wall . . . It was extraordinary indeed.

But more extraordinary things had happened in history. Had not the Yellow Emperor fought off an army single-handedly? Had not the Duke of Chou braved the fury of heaven and lived? A metal ball had been propelled with great force? So be it. It remained only to determine how it had been accomplished.

No arm could be strong enough, Ch'eng I decided quickly, or at least no *human* arm could. An inhuman arm was a possibility he did not care to contemplate. But murder, he knew, was not a tool of the spirits. Murder was an act of man against man.

This knowledge reassured Ch'eng I. If a man had done it, a man *could* do it, as impossible as it appeared to be. And if a man could do it, then Ch'eng I could figure out how. It was that simple.

The monks under the Seventh Patriarch's tutelage drew together in their largest building, one they normally used for the preparation and service of meals. Ch'eng Hao stood next to the Patriarch, who instructed the monks to answer all the investigator's questions.

There appeared to be no resistance to this order; Ch'eng Hao had feared there might be. But then resistance, he knew, like dishonesty, does not always appear on a man's face when it burns in his heart. It remained to be seen whether the monks actually *would* answer his questions; or whether they would dance around him with elaborate riddles and pointless anecdotes as their Master had done.

"A man has been murdered," Ch'eng Hao said to the assembled monks. It was best to get the basic information out of the way immediately. "As most of you know, it was your fellow monk, Kung." It galled Ch'eng Hao to refer to the dead man only by his chosen name; the man had once had two names like everyone else, and neither had been 'Kung.' But Kung was the name he had taken when he had severed his ties with his earthly family, and Kung was the name by which his fellows knew him. Ch'eng Hao swallowed his contempt and went on. "Kung was killed in a most unusual manner. My esteemed brother, Ch'eng I, is investigating this aspect of his death. I am concerned with only one question. That question is, *Who killed Kung?*" Knowing the positive effect of a weighty pause, Ch'eng Hao paused.

"It was almost certainly someone in this room."

No one moved. It was unnerving, Ch'eng Hao thought, the stoicism with which they received this accusation. Any other roomful of people would have been fidgeting with anxiety and outrage. Not these men. They would not fidget if their own parents accused them of murdering their children. Of course, for that they would have had to have children, as most—shamefully enough—did not.

"I will speak with each of you in turn," Ch'eng Hao said. "If any of you know anything about Kung's death; I strongly suggest you divulge it without hesitation." Still no response. "You," he said, picking a fellow out of the front row at random. "You will be first."

Ch'eng I bent over the corpse and inhaled deeply. It was not only death he smelled, though that scent was powerful; there was an acrid edge to the still air in the temple, a smell of fire and ashes. Incense was Ch'eng I's first thought, but he found no sign that an incense burner had been in the temple: the ground was unbroken and the walls showed no smoke stains. Then, too, the smell lacked the pungent sweetness of incense. But something, he was convinced, had been burning.

He put that thought aside and began a meticulous study of Kung's body. Ch'eng I searched it inch by inch, making mental

notes as he went. The monk had been relatively healthy, he saw—somewhat undernourished, perhaps, but then who these days was not?

The first curious observation Ch'eng I made was when he came to Kung's right hand. The fleshy pads of his fingers were singed—not so severely burned as to destroy the flesh, but burned all the same, as though Kung had taken hold of something burning and had not let go. This corroborated Ch'eng I's earlier suspicion, but beyond corroboration it offered little other than puzzlement.

The second curious observation was this: Kung's head was scarred in two places, at the base of his skull and under his chin. The scarring had evidently occurred many years before, appearing now only as raised white scar tissue against the dark tan of the rest of Kung's head. But the scarring was clearly not the result of an accident, since the two scars were identical—the shape was that of the character *wang*, three short horizontal lines intersected by a vertical.

Ch'eng I considered this for some time, deciding eventually that it was most likely the result of early childhood scarification, a common enough practice among the families of the plains. Kung's father would have placed the mark on his son, as his father's father must have done before him, and his great-grandfather before that. Ch'eng I could not help but wonder if this brutal tradition had influenced the young Kung in his decision to abandon his family for the monastery.

This thought, too, Ch'eng I set aside for further consideration at another time. Soon the body would start to decompose in earnest and at that point no further study would be possible. Ch'eng I focused his attention on the wound. It was at this point that he made his third curious observation: the neck of Kung's robe had no hole in it.

“Would you say that Kung was a well-liked man?” Ch'eng Hao asked.

“I would say that Kung was a man.” A heavyset monk named Tso sat across from Ch'eng Hao, looking and acting like a stone wall.

“Had Kung no enemies?”

“Is one who bears you ill will an enemy?”

“I would say so.”

“Then evidently he had at least one enemy,” Tso said.

“But you have no idea who that might be.”

Tso said nothing. He was well trained, Ch'eng Hao thought. Half the art of Buddhism is appearing to have all the answers and the other half is being sure never to give them. Even the Patriarch had been more helpful than this.

"You may go," Ch'eng Hao said. Tso was difficult on purpose, but then so were all the other monks he had interviewed. He had no reason to believe that Tso knew anything about Kung's death.

On his way out, Tso sent the next man in.

Bo-Tze was the oldest of the monks, by at least ten years. If he was not quite as old as the Patriarch, it was only because *no one else* was that old. The Patriarch was four hundred and three, rumor said; and even if rumor exaggerated, the Patriarch had certainly seen the tail end of ninety and was moving up on the century mark. Bo-Tze, Ch'eng Hao guessed, was about sixty.

His face had the texture of a hide left too long out in the sun and his robe was more worn than the others Ch'eng Hao had seen. He looked well weathered, a point Ch'eng Hao knew Bo-Tze would have prided himself on if monks permitted themselves pride. Unlike the other monks Ch'eng Hao had spoken to, Bo-Tze sat in front of him without even a trace of nervousness.

"Mister Ch'eng," Bo-Tze said, stressing the family name with disdain, "Kung was an undisciplined man. This was quite a serious problem. Do you know anything about Ch'an Buddhism, Mister Ch'eng? Ch'an is not what people in the world outside the monasteries think it is. Ch'an means 'meditation,' and meditation is our practice. Silent meditation: internal quiet, external harmony." The old monk took a raspy breath. Ch'eng Hao waited for him to continue.

"Kung was a dreamer and a visionary. We do *not* have visions, Mister Ch'eng. We are not the navel-staring mystics you think we are."

"I think no such thing," Ch'eng Hao said. Then: "Kung had visions?"

"Irrepressible visions," Bo-Tze said. "Or *irrepressed*, in any event. All men pray, in their fashion; Kung thought that his prayers were answered. When he meditated, he saw visions. He turned these visions into art—into art and into artifice. Then Heaven saw fit to strike him down. Surely this tells us something."

"What does it tell us?"

"That Kung's visions were not favored by..." Bo-Tze seemed to be groping for a concept.

"By..." Ch'eng Hao prodded.

"By a force powerful enough to do to him what was done to him."
"Which was?"

"I do not know, Mister Ch'eng." Bo-Tze kept up his placid facade, but Ch'eng Hao sensed a vein of anger in his voice. "But it killed him. I regret his death, of course—" of course, Ch'eng Hao thought—"but only because he died unenlightened. He will return to plaguethis world again and again until he achieves Nirvana, which he never will if he keeps on like this. *Visions!*" Bo-Tze spat the word out like a plum pit.

Vituperation aside, this was the most information Ch'eng Hao had gotten about the dead man from anyone. Kung had had visions? At last, a line of inquiry to pursue.

"Where is this 'art' you referred to," Ch'eng Hao asked, "in which Kung recorded his visions?"

Bo-Tze waved the question away. "In his cell, I am sure. But you do not understand. Kung was doing things he should not have been doing. This is why he died."

"You mean it is why you killed him," Ch'eng Hao ventured.

Bo-Tze absorbed the remark with a slow blink of his eyelids. "I did not kill Kung," he said. "A monk does not kill."

Monks *do* kill, Ch'eng Hao wanted to say, or at least one monk did, since a monk is now dead and it does not look as though suicide is a plausible explanation. But he said none of this. "You may go."

Bo-Tze rose calmly and exited. Only Lin-Yu remained for Ch'eng Hao to see.

A grotesque figure, Lin-Yu moved painfully and with great difficulty. His legs were withered almost to the point of uselessness, but somehow they just managed to keep his great bulk from collapsing. One sleeve of his robe flapped empty at his side and he was missing an eye. The empty socket stared at Ch'eng Hao. He looked aside.

"Bo-Tze tells me that Kung had visions," Ch'eng Hao said. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Bo-Tze is an old man. He talks too much and thinks too little." Lin-Yu's voice was soft, almost feminine. "Kung was a fortunate man, possessed of life's most generous curse: a creative soul. He created in a night's sleep works of greater ingenuity than most men create in a lifetime of waking hours. Kung was the best man here."

"What were the visions visions of?" Ch'eng Hao asked.

"Everything." Ch'eng Hao had expected this: a typically obscure Ch'an answer. But Lin-Yu explained, "Sometimes, merely images.

Mandalas, with a thousand buddhas in the eye of the thousand-and-first. You can see some of these—the Patriarch keeps them in his cell. He appreciated Kung's talent."

"But surely there was more to it than mandalas—"

"Oh, of course!" Excitement lit Lin-Yu's face. "He dreamt machines and tools—why do you think we are able to farm on such poor land as we have? Kung created tools for us. The universal buddha nature spoke through him, gave him knowledge of the unknown . . . For instance—"

Lin-Yu stood and lifted the skirts of his robe. His withered legs were bound in metal and leather braces with fabric joints at the knees. "Kung made these for me. Mister Ch'eng, please understand, Kung was a genius and a compassionate soul. This is a very rare and special combination."

Ch'eng Hao noticed that when Lin-Yu said "Mister Ch'eng" the words carried no tone of disapproval.

"I believe you," Ch'eng Hao said. "I only wish the others had been as open with me as you are."

"The others are performing for you, Mister Ch'eng," Lin-Yu said. "How often do they have the pleasure of an outsider's presence? They want to show each other how good they can be at the game. They have much to learn. But then, don't we all?"

Much to learn. Yes, Ch'eng Hao thought, we have much to learn. I, for instance, have to learn who killed this compassionate, visionary monk—so far I have made little progress. "Thank you," Ch'eng Hao said. He hoped he sounded more appreciative than he knew he usually did. "You may go."

"One moment, please!" Ch'eng I dashed into the room through the parted tapestry that hung over the entrance. He put a hand on Lin-Yu's shoulder. "There are questions I must ask, brother." Ch'eng Hao nodded his assent.

"What can I tell you?" Lin-Yu asked.

Ch'eng I helped Lin-Yu once more to a seated position. "Please describe for me the condition in which you found Kung's body."

"Kung was dead," Lin-Yu said. The words came haltingly and tears formed in Lin-Yu's single eye. "He had a wound in his throat. There was blood all over the ground."

"You say 'throat,'" Ch'eng I said. "Do you not mean 'neck'?"

Lin-Yu considered this. "I suppose 'neck' is as good. I said 'throat' because he was on his back."

"He was on his back," Ch'eng I repeated. "Fascinating. And he was not wearing his hood?"

"No," Lin-Yu said, "he was. His hood was on."

"Brother," Ch'eng Hao said, "have you gone mad? You know all this. This is how he was when *we* saw the body."

Ch'eng I turned to his brother. "You must be less cavalier with your accusations, Hao. I am not mad, merely curious. You see," here he turned back to Lin-Yu, "when we saw him, Kung *was* as you describe. But this is not how he was when he was killed."

Lin-Yu arched an eyebrow; it was the one above the empty socket and Ch'eng Hao had to look away again.

"I have spent a good deal of time examining Kung's body," Ch'eng I said. "He was hit with this." He pulled the lump of metal from its pouch and showed it to Lin-Yu. "But he was not hit in the throat. He was hit in the back of the neck. He did not fall backward; he fell forward. And he was not wearing his hood at the time."

"How do you know all this?" Ch'eng Hao asked, caught between admiration and disbelief.

"Simple." Ch'eng I ticked off points on his fingers. "The pellet penetrated Kung's neck and continued to the opposite wall. Yet there was no hole in Kung's hood. How can this be? Kung was not wearing his hood."

"Next: the front of Kung's robe was soaked with blood as well as the back. If the force of the attack had knocked him backwards, the front of his robe would have received very little blood. If, on the other hand, he fell forward, into his pooling blood, it would account for the condition of his robe. Therefore, he fell forward."

"Finally: the wound on the back of his neck was smaller and more contained than the wound in his throat. This suggests that the latter was the exit wound, not the entry wound. Therefore, he was hit in the back of the neck."

"Very well," Ch'eng Hao said. "I accept your analysis. But why then was Kung not on his chest with his hood off when Lin-Yu found him?"

"Someone changed the position of Kung's body," Ch'eng I said. "Turned him over and covered his head." Also, he said to himself, took away whatever had been burning in the temple and erased all signs of his presence. "Why someone would do this is a mystery. However, we do know now that there was someone with Kung when he died."

"Yes, the murderer," Ch'eng Hao said. "We already knew that."

"No," said Ch'eng I, "a third man. Because the murderer was at the edge of the forest directly across from the temple entrance—where I searched and found this." He undid the strings of the largest

pouch on his belt and poured two objects out onto the floor: a small metal mallet and a flattened metal capsule not much larger than the murder weapon.

"What is this?" Lin-Yu asked. He picked up the mallet and turned it over in his hands. The head was remarkably heavy for a tool so small.

"It is part of the murderer's device," Ch'eng I said. "I am still trying to piece together just how the device operated. It would help if I had it in its entirety. However, these pieces give us a starting point. Smell the capsule."

Ch'eng Hao picked up the dented metal packet. "You mean this?" Ch'eng I nodded. Ch'eng Hao sniffed at it. "It smells like . . ." He hesitated. "I cannot place it. But I know I have smelled it before." He handed the capsule to Lin-Yu.

"Black powder," Lin-Yu said as soon as he put the piece to his nose. "We use it from time to time for certain ceremonies. In explosive pyrotechnics."

Ch'eng I nodded enthusiastically; his suspicions had been confirmed. "A bamboo tube," he recited, "packed with black powder. One end open, the other closed except for a tiny hole. A fuse is attached to the latter. An explosive projectile is placed in the tube at the outer end of the powder. The fuse is lit. The ignition of the powder ejects the projectile, which in turn explodes in mid-air. Am I correct?"

"That is how the fireworks work, yes," Lin-Yu said, "although I cannot imagine how you found out. It is a secret among monks—"

"I have experimented on my own," Ch'eng I said abruptly. "The principles are readily apparent. What is not so clear is how they were adapted to destructive ends." He thought the problem through aloud. "A narrower tube to suit the smaller projectile, I imagine . . . and, of course, the tube would be aimed at a target rather than at the sky . . . and in place of a fuse, this capsule . . . the capsule containing a small amount of black powder, which when compressed by a blow from the mallet explodes, igniting the main load of powder in the tube . . . and, finally, a tripod to steady the apparatus, to account for the three circular indentations in the soil where I found the mallet and the capsule." Ch'eng I folded his arms and waited for his brother's reaction.

"Fireworks as a weapon," Ch'eng Hao whispered. "Ingenious." Then he realized what he had said and he shot a glance at Lin-Yu, whose expression betrayed that he had had the same thought. Ch'eng Hao voiced it for both of them. "One of Kung's inventions."

"No one else could have invented it," Lin-Yu said.

Ch'eng I was taken aback. "You think Kung invented the weapon that killed him? I find that unlikely—"

Ch'eng Hao silenced him. "I will tell you what I have learned while you were away," he said. "In the meantime, we should see Kung's cell. I will fill you in on the way."

The cells they passed on the way to Kung's were as bare as the temple. Wooden cots with no matting were the only furniture the brothers saw, and the walls were unadorned. But Kung's cell was different. He, too, had the painful-looking cot—but every inch of his walls was covered with ink drawings and elaborate calligraphy.

As Lin-Yu had said, much of the art was religious. One entire wall, for instance, was devoted to images of the Buddha and his bodhisattvas in intricate interrelations. The painting was flat and monochromatic, but somehow deeply hypnotic.

It was the other walls that revealed Kung's true genius, however, for it was there that he had composed dozens of sketches for tools and devices of mind-boggling complexity. Lin-Yu's braces were on the wall, along with drawings of the special plows and wells Kung had designed for the monks—as well as plenty of drawings of objects at whose function the brothers could only guess. The one drawing that was conspicuously absent from the wall was that of the murder weapon. None of the sketches looked similar to the machine Ch'eng I had described.

"All of these," Lin-Yu said when Ch'eng Hao asked, "are devices that Kung actually finished and gave to us. Perhaps the weapon was not perfected yet."

"It certainly worked well enough," Ch'eng Hao said.

"We do *not* know that for certain," Ch'eng I corrected his brother. "We do not yet know what happened."

"If these are Kung's finished inventions," Ch'eng Hao asked Lin-Yu, "where did he sketch ideas for new projects?"

"On the floor," Lin-Yu said. He indicated a sharp stick leaning against the cot and then a particularly scarred portion of the dirt floor. It did look as though Kung had used the space for this purpose—Ch'eng I was able to make out a character here and there—but trying to "read" it would have been futile.

"Had he no more permanent record?" Ch'eng I asked.

Lin-Yu knelt in front of the cot and reached under it. After groping for a few seconds, he pulled out a flat metal board. "He

used this from time to time. When he wanted to show an idea to the Patriarch, for instance. He would stretch a piece of fabric over it and then draw on it." Lin-Yu pointed to four hook-shaped protrusions at the corners of the board. "He designed this, too."

"So there may be a fabric sketch of the weapon somewhere . . ." Ch'eng Hao began—but Ch'eng I was already out of the room.

Ch'eng Hao ran after him. Lin-Yu followed as quickly as he could. They caught up with him outside Bo-Tze's cell. Ch'eng I burst in before they could restrain him.

Bo-Tze was seated in the lotus position on his cot, his legs crossed tightly over one another, his hands outstretched on his knees. As Ch'eng I entered, Bo-Tze opened his eyes with a start and dropped his hands to his sides.

"You were contemptuous of your fellow monk," Ch'eng I said without preamble. Then in answer to the confusion in the old man's eyes, "My brother told me what you said about Kung. That he had 'visions'—and that you hated him for it. That you feel the world looks down on *you* because of men like him. That on some level you were obsessively jealous of him."

"I was never jealous of that man," Bo-Tze snarled. In the heat of confrontation, he did not even try to hide his anger. "He was a disgrace to us."

"Why?" Lin-Yu asked. There was pain and loss in his voice. "Because of his imagination?"

"Yes," Bo-Tze said, "if you want to call it that. But that is not all. He was dealing with the outside world."

Lin-Yu shook his head. "That is ludicrous."

"I agree," Bo-Tze said. "It is ludicrous. It is also a fact. Kung was not just creating things for our use. He was also selling his creations in the secular world. He was not a monk—he was a merchant."

"No," Lin-Yu insisted. "You know he never left the grounds. How could he—"

"Are you *completely* blind now?" Bo-Tze shouted. "Wu sold Kung's goods for him."

"Wu Han-Fei?" Ch'eng Hao asked. "The messenger?"

"Our 'link to the secular world,'" Bo-Tze said sarcastically. "It was a mistake to employ him, as I predicted it would be. But who talked the Patriarch into it? Kung did. Do you not see? *Do none of you see?*"

"It is clear that you want desperately to prove yourself right," Ch'eng I said. "Is that why you went to the temple this morning when you knew Kung was there?"

Bo-Tze's guard went up at last. "I was nowhere near the temple," he said.

Ch'eng I reached out and grabbed Bo-Tze's right hand. Bo-Tze resisted, but Ch'eng I was by far the stronger man. Slowly, Ch'eng I turned the monk's hand palm upwards. The pads of Bo-Tze's fingers were seared red. "Note the singed fingers," Ch'eng I said. "Compare them to the seared fingers of Kung's body. Identical."

Bo-Tze pulled his hand away. "Yes," he said, breaking down at last, "yes, I was there. I was there because it was my last chance to expose Kung to the lot of you." Ch'eng Hao was surprised—it was hard to believe that this was the same man he had interrogated unsuccessfully so recently. Corner a lion in the field and it attacks, he reminded himself, but corner one in its den and it falls at your feet.

"I cornered Wu outside the dining hall," Bo-Tze said furiously. "He is a coward. I threatened to expose him, and he turned on Kung like this." Bo-Tze snapped his trembling fingers. "Wu said that Kung had gone to the temple to burn all the evidence of their dealings. I went there to get this evidence for myself. Sure enough, Kung was there. There was a sheet of cloth stretched out on that metal board of his and he had already set it on fire. I grabbed it; he grabbed it, too. We struggled over it—then, all of a sudden, there was a loud explosion and Kung fell forward with blood spurt-ing all over his face and I ran out of there as quickly as I could . . ." Bo-Tze was crying and out of breath; his chest heaved and his head sank forward until it almost touched his ankles.

Ch'eng Hao pulled his brother and Lin-Yu out of the room. Bo-Tze was not the murderer they sought, Ch'eng Hao knew; and at an exposed moment like this even a Buddhist deserved his privacy.

The Patriarch's cell was no larger than any of the others. He slept on the same cot. But like Kung's his walls were not bare. Also like Kung's, his walls were covered with Kung's art: complex ink drawings, passionate attempts to render the transcendent universe accessible to the human eye—Ch'eng Hao would have found it all very moving if he had been a Buddhist. As it was, he could only marvel at the artist's skill.

"We all have our failings," the Patriarch said. He was staring at Kung's largest image and his voice betrayed the rapture he felt. "Kung was an artist at heart, I a connoisseur. Neither is appropriate for a monk: a monk must lose all attachments to the things of this world because such things, in their impermanence, can only

produce suffering. The more beautiful a thing is, the more pain it will bring by its inevitable absence." The Patriarch sighed. "Yet if life is suffering, can we not take from it what little pleasure there is to be had? How could I tell Kung not to paint? That would have increased his suffering—surely our purpose is not *that*."

"There is more to this matter than the art," Ch'eng Hao said.

"Yes," the Patriarch said. "The tools. I should let my men starve rather than use the tools Kung devised? This is Bo-Tze's position, but he is a fool. If we cannot use Kung's tools, from the same argument we should not use any tools at all. We should dig in the dirt with our hands as our ancestors did. Perhaps we should not farm at all, since our oldest ancestors did not. Innovation is not evil; new tools are not worse than old. And heaven knows it is easier to meditate with a full belly than an empty one. Gautama himself said so—the Buddha himself. Starvation is not for Buddhists any more than decadence is."

"I understand," Ch'eng Hao said, "and I agree. But there remains the question of Kung's trade with the outside world."

For a long time, the Patriarch was silent.

"Bo-Tze says—"

"He is correct," the Patriarch whispered. "I looked the other way."

"You knew—"

"Ch'eng Hao, how could I not know?" At this moment the Patriarch looked very old and helpless. "I simply chose to tolerate it. Kung was too special a man, and too valuable to our lives, for me to risk losing him over such a minor point. So he sent his creations to people like yourself? There are graver sins. Perhaps it even made some Confucian think twice before cursing us. Surely it did no harm."

"No harm," Ch'eng Hao said, "but now Kung is dead."

"Yes," the Patriarch said. "That is so. And this is what comes of forming attachments to things of this world—now that we have lost him, we suffer."

Ch'eng Hao considered for a moment. "When we first spoke, you indicated that Kung had grave matters on his conscience. But if he knew that you tolerated his dealings with the outside world, surely he was not anxious about that?" The Patriarch shook his head. "What then?"

"I repeat what I told you before: I do not know."

Ch'eng Hao let this pass. "Just one more question," he said. "When Kung traded his goods through Wu Han-Fei, what did he

get in return? Not money, obviously; he had no use for that."

The Patriarch shrugged. "It is a question I never considered." Ch'eng Hao could see from the Patriarch's face that he really hadn't considered it. "Perhaps he simply received the satisfaction of knowing his creations were being put to good use."

To good use. The phrase resonated for Ch'eng Hao. Yes, he thought, good use. But surely that was not all?"

Lin-Yu directed Ch'eng I to a small building on the outskirts of the monastery complex. It was no more than a hut, really, but a solid and well-constructed one as huts went. Lin-Yu stood guard outside the door while Ch'eng I went inside.

A few minutes later, Ch'eng I emerged carrying a scorched square of fabric and a bamboo tube.

Ch'eng I steadied the tripod he had brought by pressing it down in the damp soil at the edge of the forest. The bamboo tube was clamped in place, the repaired capsule inserted in the tube's smaller hole. Lin-Yu had procured the necessary black powder and, what was equally important, the spare monk's robe that knelt, stuffed to overflowing with straw and twigs, just inside the temple entrance. Ch'eng Hao held back the small crowd of onlookers he had gathered: the Patriarch, Bo-Tze, Tso, and a handful of other monks. Wu Han-Fei was not among the group.

"I am ready," Ch'eng I announced.

Lin-Yu moved to join the others. They all turned to face the dummy Ch'eng I had erected.

Ch'eng I aimed the bamboo tube carefully, sighting along its length. Then he inserted the small white stone he had selected as a projectile and took several test swings with the mallet. He steadied himself with two deep breaths.

"Proceed," Ch'eng Hao said.

Ch'eng I swung the mallet again. This time it connected with a sharp crack, squeezing the capsule flat. This tiny explosion was followed by a much larger one, one that startled all the spectators. Even Bo-Tze, who knew what to expect, started at the noise.

But the dummy did not fall. After the cloud of smoke around him cleared, Ch'eng I inspected the tube. The projectile *had* been ejected. He ran to the temple and made a quick search of the far wall. The white stone he had chosen expressly for this reason stood out clearly against the brown of the packed earth in which it was now embedded.

"Come here," he said. The others crowded into the temple, pushing the dummy aside. They stared at the stone in the wall as though it was a religious relic and worthy of their rapt attention. Ch'eng I pushed his way back through the crowd until he was able to join his brother outside the temple.

"You missed," Ch'eng Hao said.

"Indeed. It was the strike of the mallet that ruined my aim. I had not taken it into account."

"Never mind," Ch'eng Hao said. "It is of no consequence. You will never need to use that cursed instrument again."

"I do not doubt that you are right," Ch'eng I said, "but I disagree that it is of no consequence. You see—"

But at that moment Bo-Tze and the Patriarch left the temple and intruded on the brothers' conversation.

"So that is how the murder was accomplished," the Patriarch said, clapping a hand to the small of Ch'eng I's back.

"Wu used Kung's own machine against him when he thought Kung might expose him," Bo-Tze said, his voice once again thick with disdain. "In a thief's camp, no man sleeps with both eyes closed. Kung should have known Wu would silence him if it ever proved necessary."

"How and why the murder was committed," Ch'eng Hao agreed. "You now have your answer. And we must give full credit to Ch'eng I for the greater part of this investigation—his methods proved most fruitful."

"Esteemed brother," Ch'eng I said, holding up his hand for silence, "I do not deserve your praise, or indeed any man's, if I allow the investigation to end here."

"What do you mean?" the Patriarch said. "We have seen proof—or do you, of all people, think that this was not the murder weapon?" He gestured toward the distant tripod.

"It was the murder weapon," Ch'eng I agreed.

"And did you not find the weapon, together with other incriminating evidence, in the hut of Wu Han-Fei?" Bo-Tze added.

"I did," Ch'eng I said.

Even Ch'eng Hao was confused. "And did you not put Wu Han-Fei in restraints? Surely you would not have done that unless you were as convinced as we are that he is the murderer."

"I did and I am," Ch'eng I said, "but that is only the beginning of an answer to what went on here this morning. You wrongly indict a man if you credit him with motives he did not hold."

Ch'eng Hao put a hand on Ch'eng I's shoulder. "Brother, I bow

to your expertise in matters scientific, but do me the courtesy of acknowledging my insight into human character. It has to be as I explained it to you.

"Kung distributed his creations as widely as he could out of sheer good will. Lin-Yu testifies to this. Wu Han-Fei, on the other hand, had a more concrete motive for getting involved with Kung: he sold Kung's inventions for personal profit." The word 'profit' always wore a sneer the way Ch'eng Hao said it.

"Recently," Ch'eng Hao continued, "Kung dreamt up the extraordinary weapon you just demonstrated. In his initial enthusiasm he gave a working model to Wu. But Kung was a compassionate man, dedicated to the easing of life's sufferings—consider his other inventions: implements to improve farming, Lin-Yu's leg braces, and so forth. Now, for the first time, he had created a weapon. This horrible realization, combined with the fact that he had placed it in the hands of an unscrupulous man, preyed mightily on his conscience. This is why he went to the temple: to destroy the plans for this device. The murderer stole the plans from the scene of Kung's death—and are they not the very same half-burned plans you found in Wu Han-Fei's hut?

"There is nothing more to know about this murder."

"Nothing?" Ch'eng I directed this remark at all three men, but his next was reserved for his brother. "I am disappointed in you, Hao. If Wu Han-Fei planned Kung's murder, why did he send Bo-Tze to the temple to witness it? You might argue that Bo-Tze *forced* Wu Han-Fei to tell him where Kung was—but if this was the case, why didn't Wu delay the murder until a more propitious time? And how do you explain the change in the position of Kung's body after his death?"

Ch'eng Hao said nothing.

"There can be only one answer," Ch'eng I said. "Wu Han-Fei knew Bo-Tze wanted to expose Kung's dealings with him, so he lured Bo-Tze to the temple with a story about Kung's 'destroying evidence.' Then he hid in the forest, intending to use Kung's weapon to silence Bo-Tze." Bo-Tze drew a sharp breath. "Kung was not Wu Han-Fei's intended target. Bo-Tze was."

"I bow to your superior perception," Ch'eng Hao said, grasping Ch'eng I's reasoning. "So you would argue that Wu Han-Fei wanted to kill Bo-Tze—but that from a distance of forty paces, two men in brown robes looked too similar to tell apart and as a result he killed the wrong man."

"No," Ch'eng I said, "Trust your own eyes. Do you not see that

Bo-Tze's robe is considerably more worn than Kung's and that his skin looks visibly older? You will recall that at least one man was not wearing his hood."

"Very likely neither man was," Ch'eng Hao said. "But one bald head looks much like another—"

Ch'eng I shook his head. "They look entirely different."

"But from a distance of forty paces—"

"Entirely different," Ch'eng I said firmly. "It is not only that Bo-Tze's head looked older—Kung's bore a highly visible mark: A prominent scar at the top of his neck. Am I correct?" This question was directed to the Patriarch.

"You are," the Patriarch said.

"A scar?" Ch'eng Hao asked.

"Not just any scar," Ch'eng I said, "a family brand. Clearly visible at forty paces, particularly if one is looking for it. As I believe Wu Han-Fei was. Consider this: suppose you were right that Wu Han-Fei could not tell the two men apart—do you think under those circumstances that he would have used the weapon?"

After a moment, Ch'eng Hao slowly shook his head. "Then how do you account for what happened?"

"The device was not perfected," Ch'eng I said gravely. "Wu Han-Fei knew which man he wanted to hit. *He simply missed.*"

They stood outside Wu Han-Fei's hut, Ch'eng I and Ch'eng Hao, Bo-Tze and the Seventh Patriarch. They stood outside because none of them wanted to enter.

"If what you have said is true," Bo-Tze said, "then we have been victims of an even greater deception than I feared."

"It cannot be," the Patriarch said.

"There is only one demonstration that will convince you," said Ch'eng I. He stepped into the hut.

The other men followed. Inside, Wu Han-Fei was in a kneeling position, his wrists and ankles bound behind him. The room was furnished better than the monks' cells: there were small windows with mullioned glass panes and swing shutters controlled from the inside; a mattress padded with layers of reed matting; and a stool whose top opened to reveal a bowl and a set of utensils. Ch'eng I pointed all this out while Wu Han-Fei watched in silence.

"This is the extent of Wu Han-Fei's personal profit," Ch'eng I said. "Things Kung created especially for him. If he did sell Kung's goods for money, he kept none of it. Perhaps it was all sent back to . . . his family."

Ch'eng I walked behind Wu Han-Fei and put his hand on the kneeling man's head. "A fine head of hair. He is not a Buddhist, so he can keep his hair—and can live here at a distance from the monks. A neat arrangement. When they need something from the outside world—such as men to investigate a murder—he brings it. Otherwise, he is left to himself.

"But why would a man who is not a Buddhist attach himself to a monastery in this way? It is the worst of lives, surely, caught with one leg in each of two worlds that despise one another. One must have a compelling reason to choose such a life. Why," Ch'eng I asked Wu Han-Fei, "did you?"

Wu Han-Fei said nothing.

"This was one of the questions that bothered me," Ch'eng I said. "Why would he live here? And: why would he kill to protect a monk? What was the worst the monks could do to him if his activities were exposed—send him away? Hardly a severe punishment for a man who has no ties to the monastic life anyway. No, the man they could punish was Kung—but why would a mercenary secularist care?"

"A fine head of hair," Ch'eng I said again, running his fingers through Wu Han-Fei's black locks. "A lifetime of growth concealing a scalp that hasn't seen the sun in thirty years." He turned to Ch'eng Hao. "You know, when we first met Wu, I thought he lowered his eyes out of respect for us, or perhaps fear. But then I realized it was neither—it was for want of a beard."

He bent forward over Wu's shoulder. "Look up," he commanded.

Wu Han-Fei shot a sullen glance at the ceiling.

"No," Ch'eng I said, "turn your head up." Wu Han-Fei did not respond. "Your *head*, Mister Wu . . ." Ch'eng I took a tight grip on the young man's hair and pulled his head back ". . . or should I say Mister *Wang*?"

Bo-Tze stared at the character carved in white relief on the underside of Wu Han-Fei's chin. The Patriarch sat on the edge of the mattress and put his head in his hands. Ch'eng I released Wu Han-Fei's head. "What was Kung's real name," he asked, "his birth name?"

"Wang," the Patriarch said, nodding, his voice rumbling like the largest and saddest of gongs. "Wang Deng-Mo."

"Wang Deng-Mo," Ch'eng I repeated. "And this, we can assume, is *Wang*, not Wu, Han-Fei."

"I do not understand," the Patriarch said. "Why . . . ?"

"Why?" Ch'eng I said. "Because family is a more powerful bond

than you give it credit for being. Kung took on a new identity when he joined your monastery—and so did his . . . brother?”

Wang Han-Fei let a single word escape through his clenched teeth. “Yes.”

“His brother,” Ch’eng I said. “As I thought. To maintain the family tie despite all else; to send resources back home, to help the rest of the family survive; to live and die and kill for a brother *because he is a brother—this is ‘why.’*”

“But, brother,” Ch’eng Hao said, his face red with chagrin, “how could you possibly have known? What started you thinking in this direction?”

“The question that was at once the simplest and the most complex,” Ch’eng I said. “Why had Kung’s body been moved? Bo-Tze would not have done it, not when it would have meant returning to the scene of the murder. Lin-Yu might have done it, but he would not have concealed it from us if he had. This meant it had to have been the murderer who had done it. But why would the murderer have moved Kung’s body? I asked myself this question again and again.

“Then all at once I understood. Kung’s body had not merely been moved. You will recall that Bo-Tze said Kung’s blood spurted all over his face when he was hit—yet when we found the body, Kung’s face was clean; his hood was neatly arranged; and he was lying on his back in a dignified position. It is no way for a man to be found, lying face down in his own blood—but that a killer recognized this is most unusual. That is how I knew that the killer had compassion for his victim. More than compassion, even—love and, more than love, a sense of duty.”

Ch’eng Hao had more questions to ask, and he asked them; Ch’eng I answered them in more detail than was absolutely necessary; Bo-Tze and the Patriarch left as quickly as they could; and no one noticed when off in his corner, his head hung low, Wang Han-Fei began to weep.

Ch’eng Hao sipped from a cup of bone-stock soup that Ch’eng I had prepared. Was that the faint flavor of tea he tasted, whispering under the rich marrow? Perhaps it was. Ch’eng Hao knew his brother was wont to experiment in the oddest directions. He set the cup down. “I would not have released him,” he said.

Ch’eng I paused at the fire then went on stirring. “Why, brother? Because he was a killer and killers should not go unpunished?”

"No," Ch'eng Hao said. "He killed his brother. That was punishment enough for both of them."

"Why, then?"

"Because you should have known he would kill himself."

Ch'eng I tipped the stock pot forward to fill his cup. The thick soup steamed, and he held his hands in the steam to warm them. "Forcing him to live would have been the most cruel of punishments. He could not have escaped the voice of censure no matter where he fled under heaven. A man's greatest freedom," Ch'eng I said, "is the freedom to hoard or spend his life as he chooses."

Ch'eng Hao could not disagree. "The tragedy of it is that a man such as Kung had to live as he chose, that his brother had to live to be near him, and that these lies accumulated until a killing became inevitable. A pointless killing . . ." He turned to other thoughts, less troubling for being more abstract. "I still do not understand, brother, how you knew to investigate Wu—Wang—in the first place. Even granting that you suspected that the killer was a family member—why him?"

"You were investigating the monks and making no progress," Ch'eng I said. "I trusted that, had there been progress to be made, you would have made it. So I operated on the assumption that you were looking in the wrong direction entirely. As you were."

"But my approach was the logical one—"

"Yes, it was," Ch'eng I said, "but not the correct one. Therein lies one of life's great mysteries."

Ch'eng Hao bent once more to his soup. November winds were beginning to roar on the plains, and the small warmth was welcome. The chill in his soul was not to be so easily dispelled. "I," he said, "if it came to that, would you kill to defend me?"

Ch'eng I looked up from his task. "I am your brother," he said. He brought the cup to his lips. "Heaven grant me good aim."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

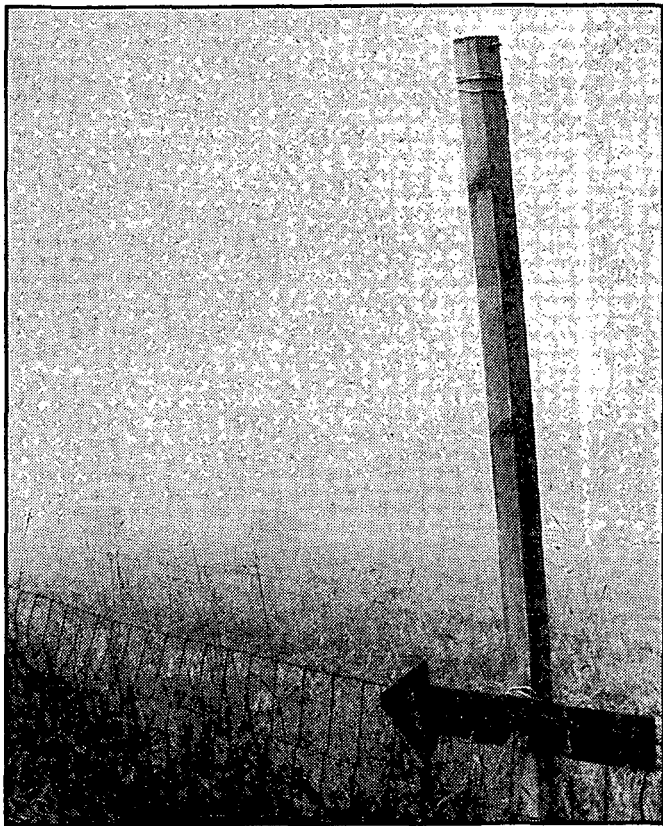


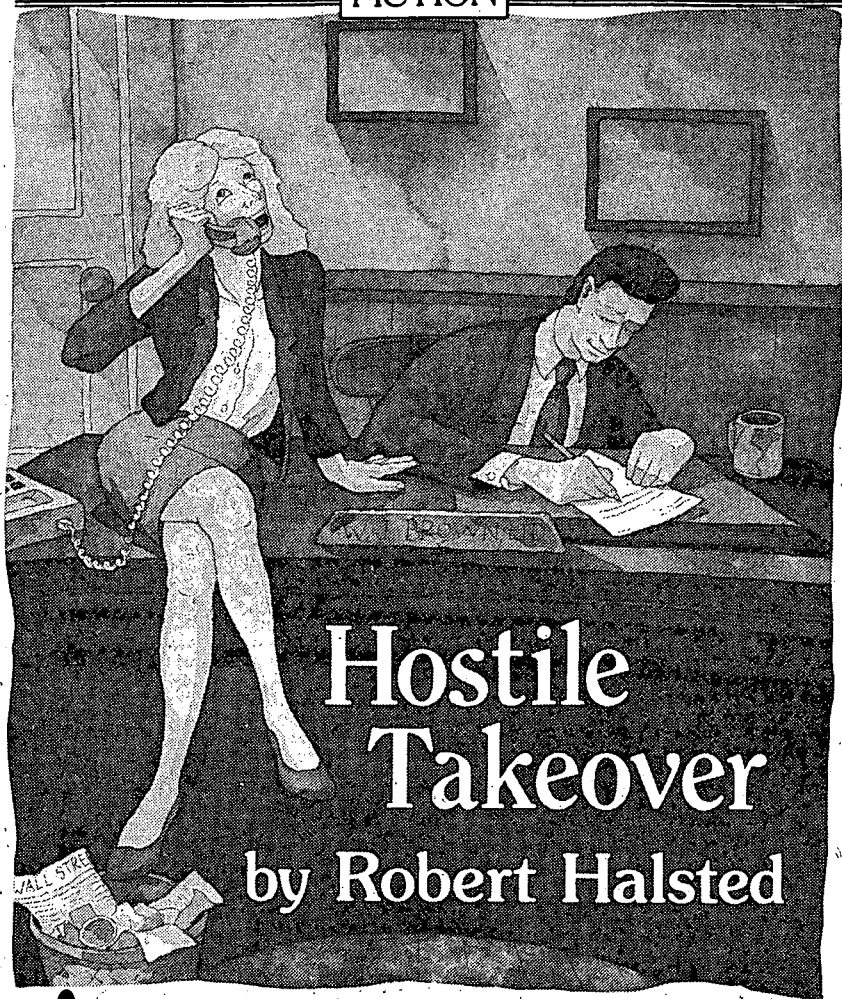
Photo by Brian N. Cox

The road to nowhere? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

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Hostile Takeover

by Robert Halsted

After we escaped from Dooleymont, Joy Sue and I got back on the interstate, crossed into the next state, and stopped for breakfast and some sleep. Whether her brother and boyfriend actually would have killed me to steal

the Mercedes I'll never know for sure, but I was glad we hadn't stayed around to find out.

I was up and dressed and ready for lunch or whatever it would be when she woke around twelve. She looked so kittenish

and cuddly when she stretched and yawned that I half regretted turning back the covers on both beds. But I like to get my projects thoroughly set up, let the customer feel confident, before I begin closing in for the kill. Besides, we were only thinking about a simple business partnership.

She was disoriented for a moment, then smiled when she remembered who I was. A very pleasant blue-eyed blonde kind of smile to start the rest of the day with.

"I ain't homesick any more," she said.

"You didn't seem very homesick last night."

"Well, I *have* been for nineteen years and some, but the further away I git from home, the less sick I am of it."

She walked away from her own punchline by getting out of bed, picking up her valise, and padding to the bathroom. Her pajamas, which looked like something her uncle might have worn as a boy and handed down to her, gave her an urchin look somewhere between pathetic and charming.

She came back in a little while fresh-scrubbed, wearing a gingham skirt, a top that almost matched it, and ankle-strap sandals.

"We'll have to get you a classier wardrobe," I said tactlessly.

She took it with a smile.

"Ah'm available for fittin's. You talkin' about comp'ny money or my own meager funds?"

I pretended to consider her question. It sounded like an offer to let me off easier than I'd been prepared for. "Let's say half and half. As a business proposition, I'll front you office clothes and some travel stuff. You cover the, ah, more personal things and leisure wear." I cleared my throat. "I'd have to, ah, have some say in what you wear during business hours."

"Fair 'nuff. You feedin' me, too?"

"Customarily, the company pays for breakfast and dinner when you're traveling on company business."

She smiled the smile of someone who planned to make a quick study of expense account loopholes. As we walked to the restaurant, she put her arm through mine like a lady. I figured I could wait till later to tell her that I would personally cover lunch.

"My mamma must be envyin' me about now," she said as she was putting away amazing quantities of food for her size.

"I should think she'd be worried sick about you. If you were my daughter and disappeared in the middle of the night with a strange man—"

"But that's what *she* wanted

to do. Just think, if she'da run off with that travelin' salesman like she wanted to do, I coulda grown up with my real father, and maybe been half civilized."

I started to say that I had her figured for just about that, and rather enjoyed her that way, but I didn't. "Well, maybe traveling with me you'll pick up some . . . sophisticated big city ways."

"I can hardly wait to see Noo York." I raised my eyebrows, and she went on: "I know you told 'em you were goin' to Noo York. And we're headin' east, not west, so you didn't mean California or Texas. So you musta been goin' to Florida, right?"

She was, I was beginning to decide, a pretty sharp cookie. I nodded in dazed agreement. Besides the correct conclusion, she was one of the few women I'd ever met for whom the points of the compass had any particular meaning.

"But I figgered I might could talk you into Noo York anyhow," she finished.

A nebulous plan began forming in my head. "Tell you what," I said, a little animated now that a plan was shaping up. "It wouldn't hurt me to drop by Delaware and check on my . . . *legitimate* business. Maybe we could fly up from there for a weekend, take in a stage play or musical, eat a cou-

ple of expensive meals, just so you can see the place and say you've been there."

I wasn't that crazy about New York. Criminal and con artist I may be, but I'm out of my class there, a small fox among wolves. When you talk economics in the Big Apple, Hobbes is a better reference than Locke. *Homo homini lupus*, and all that. Even the subway turnstiles are out to get you.

The compromise plan seemed to please her. We drifted eastward, spent nearly a grand on her wardrobe in Richmond, wandered around Williamsburg for a day. It amused but didn't impress her, and looked to me a lot more like an expensive stage setting and less like living American history than it had years before.

After that we went up the eastern shore to Wilmington. She was, I thought, terrified at going over and under twenty-odd miles of open salt water when we crossed Chesapeake Bay, but she was brave about it. My fingerbones healed in mere days, after she'd held my hand each time we went tunneling.

I drove straight to my apartment in Wilmington, a sort of glorified efficiency I used a few weeks out of the year, within walking distance of my office if the weather wasn't too east

coastish. It was a good day, the wind off the Atlantic, and I opened all the windows.

"There's just the one king-size and it's my territory, not to be relinquished," I told her. "We can get you a rollaway if you want, or at your size you might be comfortable on the couch."

"You'd prob'ly be better hug-gin' than a ol' pillow."

"I might lose control."

"You will not lose control without ma permission."

We seemed to have made some usable definitions that we could live with for the time being.

After we were settled in and refreshed, I told her I was going to my office, a posh little private cubbyhole in a posh suite, with high-class generic receptionists. A lot of people who live somewhere else and own corporations in Delaware use a similar system.

"Kin I come?"

"Not in your lounging pajamas. If you show up at my office, it will be as my confidential secretary, appropriately dressed."

She changed quickly to a grey suit, medium black heels, and a prim-collared white blouse. I assumed she paraded back and forth in her underwear while getting ready because (a) it was a tiny apartment and (b) they probably always

did it that way in the log cabin she grew up in. She didn't seem ill at ease or seductive about it—though I did more sidelong looking than I really felt was proper—but just matter of fact. When she was finished she still looked like a young sexy girl I'd picked up for reasons other than clerical. But less so than before.

When we arrived at 9100 Offices, I was wearing a double-breasted brown suit and rimless glasses, my hair an anonymous brown after I'd washed the darker rinse out. I introduced her to the head receptionist and took her into my private office.

In Wilmington, and hardly anywhere else, I am myself, and a totally respectable businessman doing odd jobs at a fair pay in the securities and corporate structure areas. Nothing big, on purpose. I am W. J. Brown, Ltd.—"Bill" to my associates — partly because the suffix has a transatlantic hint to it, and partly because limited partnerships invite a lot less official scrutiny than full-fledged corporations.

There was a laundry basket's worth of mail on my desk, after my weeks in Cincinnati. Anything important when I'm on the road gets to me by weekly phone calls I make, never disclosing where I really am.

I got her started on rough-sorting the mail while I made a few phone calls: "Hey, Jack,

long time no see. . . . I've been on the road, cornering the market on ginseng futures. . . ." That sort of thing. A good bit of legitimate business comes my way in that kind of conversation. Both are boring, but necessary to my front.

I finished my duty calls and started the bird-dogging ones. On the third call I hit what seemed like a mild vein of pay-dirt—a broker with a client interested in a small block of stocks in an estate situation that I had an inside door to—so I agreed to meet him at our club.

"I'm going out for a while," I told Joy Sue. "If you need me you can reach me at the Bears Club. It's on the Rolodex. If you get bored, close the office and go shopping or something. I'll be back here about four. If you're not here, I'll go on home around five. Take what you need out of petty cash and leave a memo in the box."

I deliberately gave her the information rapid-fire to see how she handled it. Very well, apparently. She asked a couple of pertinent questions—like my home address and phone number—and took brief, cryptic notes on a scratch pad.

At the Bears Club I had a couple of drinks with Irving. It seems hardly worth mentioning, but I will mention it, that the membership was one of the

most bullish crowds in town. Our deal was small stuff, to net us a couple of hundred each for a few minutes' actual work, but little deals like this accumulated to make up most of my legitimate income. Which had to be enough to screen my more interesting work.

The club was mostly brokers, accountants, and lawyers, with a few other shady types thrown in for variety. By the time we'd worked out the terms of the deal, a general conversation had grown up around us, and we joined in.

"What's the latest on Ulf-sen?" one of them was asking another. I pricked up my ears.

"Still quietly buying, last I heard," someone answered him.

My radar antenna—also AM, FM, UHF, VHF, and sonar—started tingling. "What's the one-boy wrecking crew doing this time?" I asked as casually as I could manage.

"Minicorp. He's got a way to go yet, but they're running scared."

"I guess they would be. Getting raided by the Last of the Vikings."

The conversation kept going, and I kept listening. I had a phone brought and told Joy Sue to feed herself and take a cab home. I nursed my third drink while they primed and re-primed themselves, and learned a good bit. By the time the

crowd started breaking up and going home to dinner, I had a nice plan forming.

Rolf Ulfsen was a classic case of something. Rags to riches or virtue to vice.

The son of poor but thrifty immigrant parents, he had decided when young not to make a living tilling the chilly soil of Minnesota. He worked and wangled his way through college to a B.S. in B.A., then got a graduate scholarship to an Ivy League business school.

By age twenty-four he had acquired a number of things: a reputation in the business world, his first million, a lot of enemies, and epithets like "Super Yuppie," "Limo Surfer," "S.O.B.," and other worse ones. As Ulfsen made more money it became apparent why he was making more enemies. By the time he had become enough of a public property to show up in the weekly scandal sheets, his M.O. was well known in the trade.

He started with a hostile takeover. If the tactic hadn't existed already, he would have invented it. As it was, he did some innovation in the field.

He was a genius at acquisition. The first few thousand shares more or less, especially if they're not voted in a boat-rocking way, are pretty much

invisible. He held blocks that size in an indeterminate number of corporations, so many that it was pointless for management to worry until their own was singled out. And by then it was too late.

From that point, before they started worrying, he was discreet and subtle. In the course of normal trading, stocks would drift through brokerages, unknown individuals, small corporations, for a few months or a couple of years. Then they would all turn up in Ulfsen's hands.

Say you have a small corporation with a hundred thousand shares of voting common at ten dollars par. That million dollars' worth of stock may represent the power steering that controls millions upon millions of physical plant and other assets. The ratio between the face value of stocks and the liquidation value of the business is an excellent measure of the health of a corporation and is reflected, though not one-to-one, in the price of shares on the market. After that, it gets very complicated. But if you grab fifty thousand and one shares of that stock, the whole show is in your pocket.

Takeovers are common procedure. A rich dentist wants to fulfill a childhood dream of owning a golf club factory. Not

together, he goes out and buys one, in the form of a majority of the shares. Normally it's no more disruptive or destructive than most other business procedures. Which is to say, usually the boss doesn't botch things too badly for the guy with the shovel to straighten them out.

Ulfesen, however, was of another breed. He didn't give a holy damn about the fun, glamor, prestige, creativity, or even the egotistic power trip of running a corporation. He was out for money, pure and simple. One thing I'd heard him called was "Spiderman": he caught it; he sucked it dry; he threw the empty husk away. He spent some of the money in intermittent flashy living, if you could believe the tabloids, but he seemed to spend most of it escalating the same game. He wasn't yet in the top ten of multibillionaires, but he was working his way up steadily and not too slowly.

By the time I got home I was weary of the business world generally and of Ulfesen in particular. I put the whole affair, for the moment, in the back of my mind and shut the door.

Joy Sue hadn't eaten, so we went out to a nearby place for a decent steak. She was cool throughout the meal without saying why. I have learned to let women have their moods and not hasten trouble along

before it's ready, so I pretended not to notice.

Whatever was bothering her, it didn't affect her appetite. Watching her surround thirty or forty bucks' worth of quality cuisine as fast as it arrived, I considered the possibility that I'd unwittingly adopted a pregnant girl, but decided she was just compensating for the times during her childhood when the possum crop failed or something. I plied her with port and cheese, then brandy with her coffee, and this seemed to have a mellowing effect. Except for a tendency to hold her pinky out, she looked quite housebroken. She didn't touch the flatware till she had watched me.

I was still roadweary, and tired from the business day as well. I showered and pajama'd myself as soon as we got home, turned both bedlamps low, and staked out my side of the bed by placing myself and a paperback there. In a few minutes she changed to sexless, boyish pajamas, and still looked like a sexy girl. I decided if the situation got too frustrating I'd simply get her a place of her own. Without discussing with myself why I was taking responsibility for her in the first place.

"You stay on yore side," she said as she got in bed.

"I plan to," I answered, smiling neutrally.

I lasted another five minutes, then put down the book and turned my light off. She was still reading a trade magazine she'd brought from the office. I didn't know whether she was doing her homework, trying to bore herself to sleep, or putting on some kind of act that went over my head.

During the night I felt something warm and soft molding itself against me. Whatever it was said, "Don't you go gittin' no ideas."

"Wouldn't think of it," I mumbled.

"Ah, was just gittin' a little cool over there."

"You're better hugging than the pillow." Matter of fact, I had been hugging my pillow.

"You too. You're better huggin' than ol' Bobby Russell."

I lay awake for a while, enjoying the touch and warmth of her, realizing I was experiencing jealousy and possessiveness for the first time since college.

Despite the underlying distraction, I woke with a nicely formed plan. I basked for a moment in the tantalizing pleasure of holding Joy Sue, then disentangled myself, started the coffee, and sat at my desk with paper and pen.

I started to do some paperwork, then realized I didn't have the basic numbers to be-

gin adding and subtracting. I did a couple of trial runs anyhow, with fairly credible maximum and minimum imaginary figures, and estimated my plan would work. Then, quietly, I slipped on slacks and sport shirt and made a quick trip to a private membership reference library, used their bound volumes and some computer time, and got much of what I needed.

When I got back to the apartment, Joy Sue had been out for groceries and was fixing breakfast.

"Just run off and leave me, why don't you?" she said, with identifiable asperity. "I was hopin' you'd be gone jess a little bit longer, so's I could feed you some cole bacon an' aigs."

"Petulance ill becomes you. I've been hard at work while you were getting your beauty sleep. Each of us contributing what we're best at." I gave her a playful kiss on the lips, which she accepted without comment.

She busied herself with breakfast, and I reviewed my notes till she called me to the table.

It was well set and well served, except for the flatware's being in random order. "Very elegant," I commented, not sarcastically.

"I used to help Grandmaw Dooley in the cafe," she said. "I'm pretty good at it. That, an' a lotta things." I thought there

was a playful-malicious twinkle in her eye, but her face was harder to read than you'd think would be the case with a simple mountain gal lured away from her home by a city slicker. Besides which, I didn't lure her, she hijacked me, y'r honor.

Something interpersonal was poised on a brink, getting ready to happen. Till last night she had been all friendly and compliant, and now there was some kind of chip on her shoulder.

I decided to nip it in the bud. "Look, Joy Sue. I'm working on a *big* project, the biggest I've ever thought of, let alone tried. If you're angry at me, let's clear it up. If you regret coming with me, I'll fill your chubby little hand with cash and drive you to the bus station. I don't have the time and energy for games."

She sat on my lap, not so much the seductive female as a cat defining its territory. "Not angry. Jess a little insecure."

"Mmh. If this is insecure, I don't want to see you get mad."

She grinned, a Cheshire sort of grin. "That is a sight. Y'ever notice that little scar under m' brother's left eye?" She studied her hands. Cat flexing its claws. I had noticed the scar. I hadn't noticed till then what nice nails she had.

We ping-ponged some shallow, low-key personal stuff back and forth for a couple of minutes, then she said out of no-

where, "Tell me all about this new scam you're workin' up."

"We don't use that word. Deal, coup, or even killing. Not scam." I frowned in thought. "Look, once I've told you about it, you're as guilty as I am. Accessory before the fact. Maybe the best thing would be for you to cut and run. Accept a grant for me for subsistence and education, go out and find your rightful place in the world." I had no idea why I was working so hard to send her away.

"You're not gonna get rid o' me that easy. Now jus' talk slow, an' explain the big words."

Explaining it to her helped clarify it for myself. She asked some dumb—no, naive—questions, and a couple of very sharp ones. What I told her was approximately this:

In the world of securities, one doesn't get sentimental about corporations. Unless, I suppose, it's your own. But Minicorp was a firm a lot of people, including myself, had friendly feelings for.

Minicorp was, interestingly, the brainchild of another Midwestern Scandinavian, John Stromquist. His life was pretty much an open book: high school football team, middle-aged now with a loyal dowdy wife and 3.2 children in high school and college, that sort of thing.

His parents had run a little

neighborhood store in maybe Iowa or Nebraska, and it had slowly withered as the big chains drew away the clientele. When they finally folded, he was working his way through college.

He dropped out, went to work for a brokerage, and patiently put together a package to rescue the other mom-and-pop operations left in the world. It was a sentimental gesture, unrealistic, contrary to economic trends, and one he didn't have the experience or the backing to handle. And it worked.

Stromquist wasn't brilliant, but he was normally intelligent, plodding and persistent and committed. He did a few dumb things and some pretty smart ones, made some wrong guesses and had some keen intuitions, carefully corrected course when he saw the need. The operation he finally put together had the patchwork look of the British Parliament, and like it was good at muddling through.

He had four kinds of securities out: debenture bonds, preferred stocks, and two series of voting common. That had been one of his wrong guesses, but no Wall Street whiz kid could have told it was wrong till now. When he did it, it made sense. Most of your brilliant tycoons would have done the same without a second thought.

The junk bonds, everybody figured, people had bought because they thought he had an honest face, or let sentiment get in the way of common sense when he explained his goals. Nearly all the bearers were surprised when they turned out not to be junk. He'd put twenty percent of their face value in interest-bearing escrow to cover early dividends, then used that as collateral for working money. Every dividend was made on time, with a little extra from a bonus clause he'd not even made a point of.

You can imagine this made a lot of people happy and didn't hurt his image. A couple of cynics wondered if he was pyramiding, but his operation was so out in the open that nobody much took it seriously. Then, when he came out with his 6½% preferred stocks right after the second bond dividend, they sold.

By now his operation was rolling. There were Minit Marts across eight or nine states, franchised co-ops still mostly in the hands of the original Mom and Pop. They offered some of the services of convenience stores—with the help of a couple of other people, he'd done some really creative merchandising—and on a day to day basis were holding their own with supermarket chains on staples, though of course they couldn't

match them in variety. But they stayed in business and made money. A decent living for the owners, better than they'd had as independents, and a small trickle back to Stromquist that added up.

His Series A common stocks had been part of the franchises fee, some of them on a dollar down, dollar a week basis. The outlet owners had often bought extra shares, less for the modest dividends than for a bigger piece of the action. His own block of shares were nearly all Series A.

Then, when he was ready to begin the Minit Meal operation, he went public. A normal thing to do. He overestimated the idealism of the SAP—Stockowning American Public—which isn't difficult to do. He wanted to give Americans the opportunity to invest in the American way of life. Supply quotes according to how cynical you are.

He could have made it non-voting, he could have issued more preferred shares. He could have sold a big issue of bonds by word of mouth, no promotion required, with his AAA-1 D&B rating and his track record.

But he issued Series B, and it sold. Series A was an open issue, more membership cards printed as more members joined. Series B was a limited edition, five million shares at five dol-

lars par. He kept a few himself, sold maybe a hundred thousand to owners of Series A, and the rest went across the counter. The issue had sold out in two years, and it launched Minit Meal and strengthened Minit Mart by allowing expansion, though it was already solid enough. Later the two merged internally and became Minicorp. He bought out the dying Two Dollar Lunch chain and ran it as training outlets. Mom and Pop restaurants joined the way groceries had, and it was a moneymaker from the word go. He had first-rate consultants and some damn good ideas of his own. A lot of pre-prepared stuff, but shiptight quality control. Considerable local autonomy—he didn't set ceilings, he set floors—and freshness a must for all produce. He'd built his own trucking operation serving both the groceries and restaurants.

I'd eaten in Minit Meals more than once, and they were head and shoulders above any other fast and cheap places. Some of it that I knew had to be pre-prep I still couldn't help tasting as homecooked. I found out during the coming caper that none of the pre-prep came in a single package, one of his secrets. The final ingredients of his Salisbury steak (Wednesday Special) weren't added till minutes before serving started. And the

beef inside them was real.

Joy Sue was taking notes, or maybe doodling. "So how many o' which is what? I think maybe you lef' me back there a ways." I wasn't sure I had.

"Okay, there's one million preferred at ten par, nearer fifteen market right now. Forget those, they don't vote. About two point three million Series A, nearly all in friendly hands, five dollars par, ten market. Probably a few thousand issued since last report, still friendly. Series B, five million in existence, same five and ten. Nearly one million known to be in hostile hands, Ulfesen and his identifiable fronts. Assume another million he's holding under cover. Say he has two million shares, the guys in the white hats have two point three million. That leaves three million running loose. It will take Ulfesen roughly one point eight million of those to take the company over. He's buying steadily, we have almost no idea how fast. If the Stromquist people can hold firm control over at least one point three million of Series B, they're safe. For a while."

"They all vote by the same rules?"

"One share of common stock is one vote, Series A or B. Both sides will get proxy votes, but we can't predict how many. Stromquist will have far more friends, but from what I know

of Ulfesen he'd be willing to pay twenty dollars to vote a ten dollar share. Literally."

"An' this Woofson, he's not plannin' to expand an' improve, just suck the comp'ny dry?"

"Right."

"An' you're gonna just *hand* him a hunnert thousan' shares?"

"Not *hand* him. Convey at double the going market rate."

She stood up, eyes blazing. "Billy John Brown, you're *im-moral!*"

"Honey chile, I told you I was a crook and a criminal and a con man." If she could call me Billy John, I could call her honey chile. "If you don't want to play, you don't have to."

"Our bacon and *aigs* this mornin' come from a Minit Mart, an' they was nice as innnythaing to me there though Ah was a stranger, an' you're plannin' to sell 'em down the *road!*" The more emotional she got, the more Appalachian she talked. "An' nice *fresh* aigs, too!" I reached toward her and she slapped my hand away. "Keep yore dirty hains offa me!"

I breathed deeply and tried to look more patient than I felt. "Sweetheart, I'm not a county jail type of crook, I'm a federal pen type of crook. Now would you like to hear the *entire* plan?"

She continued glowering at me, crossed arms concealing lovely bosom, but her eyes were twitching.

Only Annette had ever known this much about one of my schemes, and that was when she had participated in the planning, after we'd been friends, partners, and lovers for a long time. Sure that I was being a damn fool, I told the hillbilly gal the whole basic plot, and part of the ornaments, while she cleared away the breakfast dishes.

"That could be kinda fun," she said when I'd finished. "Ah've decided maybe I do like you a little. Uncross your knees." She sat a soft warm cushiony sit on my lap. "Once I good 'n kiss a man, he's never the same after."

When the kiss was over a few minutes later, I believed her. I *haven't* been the same since. In the kissing department, she was born to be great.

It was all very Machiavellian, Byzantine, cloak and dagger.

First an anonymous typed letter to Ulfson's corporate HQ, alerting him to expect a message in a week concerning a possible acquisition of great interest to him. Top security and total anonymity required. We marked the letter "Confidential—Executive Office Only" and mailed it from Philadelphia.

The next ten days—plenty of time for him to get the message

and for somebody in the office to be alert for a follow up—we did normal business things and made a few thousand legal bucks, enough to feed us and pay some overhead.

My confidential executive secretary showed great promise, at least. She kept the sweet warm Southern honey in her voice while managing to sound Eastern finishing school. A number of casual callers tried to date her, sight unseen. She took total care of the mail, was slow but conscientious in the little bit of typing required. Her spelling was, on the average, better than her pronouncing. She even took a little shorthand, her own hybrid system.

"Double-you Jay Brown, Limited," she answered the phone one day. "One moment, I'll see if he's in. May I say who's calling? . . . Well, I *know* he's sittin' right here in a li'l tiny room with me, but he won't be *in* till you tell me who you *are*. . . Very well, Mr. Berlin, if you'll hold for a moment."

I winked at her and picked up. "Irv Cohen, what's up?"

"Oh, a little action here and there. Doing a small estate portfolio, and ran across some stuff you said to look out for."

That had to be Minicorp B. "Good. Can I afford it?" Both sides were paying well over twice par for it, the rare times it hit the open market. Mostly

it was conveyed privately, more often than not in substantial blocks. If Ulfsen won the battle, people who were paying fifteen or twenty dollars for it now would be lucky to unload it at five, unless they were insiders in the conspiracy.

I paid Irv the going rate for the twenty shares. I'd have got them some other way, but this helped. We framed our second letter to Ulfsen. Joy Sue made a couple of useful suggestions, and we got it in the mail the next night. It stated that within six weeks, the writer expected to acquire from various sources as many as fifty thousand shares of Minicorp Series B Common Stock, and would Ulfsen be interested at market plus a fifty percent surcharge "for acquisition"? This time we used a fake name with a real P.O. box in Philly. It was a bit of commuting, but I stay dead legal around home base.

My palms began to sweat. I had decided to make it as much as that because I wanted to pull one million-dollar scam in my lifetime, just to know that I'd done it. Not to mention that the money would be useful. When the shares started going up, though, I'd retrenched from the planned hundred thousand shares. I just wasn't ready for that size operation.

I didn't know whether Joy Sue was so calm because she

had nerves of steel or because it just wasn't real to her. If I hadn't been so edgy, I wouldn't have believed it was real to me.

It seemed time for a break, so I got some reservations for a New York weekend. We took a midday plane up Friday, went to a fair musical and an excellent restaurant, and then forgot the rest of our reservations and ate our meals in a posh little honeymoon suite at the Royal Wessex. I meant to do some business research while we were there, but it slipped my mind.

As our little commuter plane leveled off southbound Monday, she said with a weak grin, "Noo York shore is a sexy town." She hadn't even remembered to be scared taking off.

I kissed her fingertips. "Yeah."

We were basically silent for the forty-five minutes of the trip. Not a case of *omne animal post coitum triste*, but just that it was no longer a "hey, roommate, ol' buddy" situation. It was somehow a lot scarier than when Annette and I had more or less absentmindedly started doing the natural thing. I wished for Annette now, not to replace Joy Sue but somehow to protect me from her.

Tuesday we threw ourselves into our job and tried to work our buns off. Joy Sue was kind enough to wear something

shapeless to the office, but on her it didn't take.

By then the time had come, and a little more, for me to contact my printer. I hadn't been skittish about it since the second time, but this was bigger.

I've never met my printer, and hope I never will. There are probably about three layers of intermediary between us. What I do is put samples of what I want copies of in a double-sealed envelope and address it to a presumably fictitious person at an accommodation box in the office of a courier service. Instructions, simply coded, go in another envelope to another name at another courier service. I carry them by hand to a place that is not Wilmington.

In a week or so I get a billing, written to my own fictitious name, at the second courier service. The billing amounts to ten percent of a value somewhere between par and market, in the case of securities; I've never known his exact formula. For a relatively small extra charge he ages stuff with UV radiation and mild dirt. This is an option I often use.

Joy Sue and I spent a full day choosing serial numbers and degrees of aging for each block. We threw in a hundred or so odd-numbered singles.

I didn't tell her, but the seventy-five grand I paid the printer nearly cleaned us out. If the ca-

per didn't work, the next issue we'd peddle would be pencils on the street. Assuming we were still running free.

While we waited for the printer, we typed out two listings of the stocks, one as an offer and one as a bill of lading. That was probably the riskiest moment in the whole operation. If they screened the serial numbers, they might find we were trying to sell them something they already had. The only safeguard I had come up with was to add an extra zero at the front to confuse the computers and/or hand checkers. They were all high numbers, and that would help muddle it a bit more.

"Makin' a killin' in the stock market's harder work than I'da thought," she said halfway through the second day of it. "You gotta pay me minimum wage anyhow if it don't work, don't you?"

I smiled wearily and kissed her forehead. "If it don't, doesn't, work, we won't need to worry about that. They'll feed us in jail."

In due course we sent the inventory to the imaginary person who was middle-manning on Ulfson's side. After that we checked the P.O. box in Philadelphia more often.

Things seemed to drag on interminably by the awkward

system I'd set up. We needed safeguards, but I got awfully tired of the road to Philly. Air taxi, with hired ground transportation of one kind or another, wasn't much better.

And then one day the goods arrived. They were beautiful—that is, credible—and we wallowed in them for a while. We did a little more aging and dogearing of our own, for variety. One bundle, when we got through, even showed where a rubber band had been around it for years.

The next day I picked up the acceptance in the mail, with contact info and a New York phone number. I made the call from a WATS Line jack at the club with an old silicon-chip phoneset that made me sound like a sound-effects man at the bottom of a barrel. Just to be safe, I borrowed a little of Joy Sue's dialect on top of it.

That night, instead of a quick kiss and then returning to our own sides of the bed as we'd been doing since New York, we went to sleep hugging. Not for passion, but for comfort and reassurance.

The second day after, two people boarded a plane together in Wilmington, headed for Buffalo. A blowzily dressed frizzy redhead, a pale-blond guy—even blond eyebrows—gauchely attired in a padded-shoulder jacket and wide kelly-green tie right

out of the fifties, or so. Their parcels were cardboard, carefully sealed with matte-surface tape. Her accent was nasal, vaguely working-class Northeast, his more Midwestern. You get the idea. We simply couldn't trust anyone else as courier, though we presumed Ulfesen had reliable hired hands to cover it. I'd have liked to see him up close, briefly, but didn't think it likely.

The short, fat, and swarthy man, accompanied by an amorphous-looking assistant, with whom we spent an agonizing hour in a nondescript hotel room was definitely not Ulfesen, who had a Cassius' lean and hungry look. He laboriously examined the stocks and weighed them against the tally sheet while we laboriously counted a little over one and one half million dollars in U.S. banknotes, basically twenties and fifties. "We had to put in a few hundreds," he apologized. They were, however, old hundreds with random serial numbers, like all the rest of the bills. The money, stacked, would have been about forty-eight feet high, but crammed into suitcases we could manage it. It weighed less than a ton, at least early in the trip.

Bellhop, elevator, long wait for a cab. There was less nervous sweat smell now that there were only the two of us. Finally, ourselves in the cab and our for-

tune in the trunk, the redhead leaned over to me and whispered, "Let's go spend it." I kissed her and squeezed her hand so hard she winced, then kissed it and apologized. We were both near incoherence.

Skycap. Careful luggage checking, one carryon, the only one small enough. Wilmington at last, reverse order skycap/taxicab sequence. When we got home it was dark enough not to worry about neighbors reporting a strange couple entering my apartment.

"Go git us a bottle o' champagne while I slip into something comfortable, sweetheart."

I kissed her tiptilted nose, still visible under the disguise. "Do you mind if I take off this costume first?"

"Don't start undressin' yet. We'll never git the champagne if you do." I grinned, went to the fridge, and fetched the bottle lying down on the back of the bottom shelf. "Think you're pretty smart, don't ya?"

"You never doubted it, did you?"

"Not too long at a time. . . . Ah'd like a shower first. Last one in is a rotten aig." She pulled off the ugly wig and tossed it across the room. I decided to put off redyeing my hair back to normal till morning.

It would have been a longer shower if the champagne and

money hadn't been waiting. But we washed the day's travel and stress off us, dried each other, and put on pajamas. Then we sipped champagne and looked at bundles of money.

"You could smooch me a little," she said as we were admiring a heap of approximately four hundred thousand dollars we'd poured onto the floor just to look at.

"What do you mean by 'smooch'?"

"Oh, hug me some an' cuddle me an' kiss me a little bit once in a while. If you're not still scairt."

"Not as scared as I was."

"Me neither."

In the small hours she shook me awake. I gathered her in and kissed her face, which felt pretty even in the dark. "Are you insatiable?" I demanded.

"That's not what I'm wakin' you for this time. I got a question."

"Mm-hm?"

"Where were you all them times you called in and said you's at your club or in somebody's office?"

"Where I said I was, of course. That's why I told you. So you could get in touch. If you needed to." I was still half asleep, and puzzled.

"You wasn't with another woman?"

I shook my head to clear it.

"Uh-uh. God, no. There was already one woman too many."

"Who?"

"You."

"You mean that?"

"Of course. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Uh-uh." She was silent for a minute. Then she asked, "Are you in love? A thaink Ah am."

"'Fraid I am too."

"Whut we gonna do 'bout it?"

"I have no idea."

"Me neither. Gimme some more lovin's."

I gave her more lovin's, and got back better than I gave.

The sun was well up when I slipped out of bed, feeling half adolescent and half middle-aged, the regular me on vacation apparently. I stumbled over the heap of money on the floor, and wondered in awe at seeing myself leave nearly half a million unguarded overnight. Not to mention whatever we'd done with the rest of it.

I started the coffee, then on impulse went back to the bed. I pulled off the little bit of sheet that covered a little bit of Joy Sue and gazed down upon her. The lust, to my amazement, wasn't totally exhausted, though it had had every opportunity. But it was contaminated with something far more serious and fearsome.

I had to lighten my mood, so I picked up some bundles off the floor, broke the bands, and

gently snowflaked the sleeping form of Joy Sue with ten grand in fifties. I didn't even care if a couple got lost in the laundry.

It seemed a fluke, but the fifty thousand fabricated shares apparently pushed Ulfesen up to the critical point. Less than a week after our delivery, rumors at the club were that he was calling for a major stockholders' meeting.

This accelerated our schedule considerably. We'd been going to prepare the letter at leisure and, if the fireworks hadn't started by the time we had somewhere interesting to go, mail it then.

So we framed the letter, informing Stromquist that Ulfesen had counterfeit shares and giving enough correct serial numbers to set off a thorough search. I also had some fairly reliable information on illegally obtained proxies, and we included that. We drop-shipped it to Stromquist via Fort Worth, dime store stationery we handled with gloves, and second carbon to render the typewriter unrecognizable if any one got hellbent on tracking us down, which was unlikely. We could have sent a copy to the SEC, but it seemed much better to let Stromquist wake the sleeping dogs if he decided it was needed.

"I think it's about time for a little trip to Jamaica," I told Joy

Sue when we'd done our duty by Stromquist and the American way of life.

"Ah'm willin'," she said. "Any p'tic'lar reason?"

"Do a little banking." I gestured at the linen closet, where we had stashed the boxes of banknotes. That's where she had put them when she vacuumed the carpet, and we decided it was as safe a place as any.

"How on earth you gonna git it 'crost the border? Won't they check it, an' all?"

"It won't go in this form. I deposit it over a period of time, several banks in several towns, in escrow accounts, so titled. Then I draw a cashier's check on the account made out to an imaginary client. I deduct one and a half percent, which I declare in my tax return as my commission. This keeps the Feds off me. It looks like somebody else's money I've handled for them in a securities transaction. Then I deposit the checks in interest-bearing accounts here and there, mostly Jamaica. Jamaican banks, Swiss banks, British banks—they've all got branches there."

"How do you ever keep up with all yore names?"

"It's a challenge. . . . Joy Sue, do you want me to bank part of yours? There's a number of ways we can do it. I just have to be sure, for my own safety, the tax

people don't investigate you."

Her eyes went blank. She had to trust me enough for me to keep us both out of trouble.

"What's the ten percent you promised me come to?"

I didn't think she hadn't figured it out already. "After deducting my expenses, which were around eighty thousand, that ten percent would be, roughly, a hundred forty-two thousand. But . . ."

"But there's somethin' in the fine print says I don't rilly git it?" Her eyes now reminded me of a set of blue and white glass marbles I'd played with as a child, cold and opaque, and her lips were set in a tight line, like the clasp of my grandmother's coin purse.

"No. Not that. Dammit, Joy Sue, I want you to have half of it."

She frowned, eyes still opaque. "How 'bout we put the ten percent in my name and the rest o' the half in a joint account?"

I didn't believe what was going on, what I was saying or the answers I was getting. I stood and pulled her up to me. "One or both of us need to have our heads examined."

"You could *start* there," she answered, and held her lips up to me, less like a coin purse now and more like a fullblown rose.

I humored her by examining her head for a minute, checking the various parts of it for kiss-

ability and such, and then held her at arm's length. "Jamaica's a safer subject."

The Hindu wiseman, or whoever it was, was right. Wealth is a burden. We worked ourselves ragged for a week and more. We went to banks in four states, invented firms, used all my available aliases. It was fun for a while, but it palled.

At last we had laundered all but a couple of hundred grand. I carefully took the toilet paper dispenser out and suspended the money between the wall studs. We just didn't feel like processing any more. When we finished the whole process, we had a bunch of cashier's checks and a residual deposit in some key accounts.

On a hunch I did an experiment as our plane took off. Before she got really phobic, I started smooching her and kept it up till we were well airborne. It not only averted the fear of flying, but it added something to the smooching.

Our stay of ten days in Jamaica was quite fraught. It was financial, erotic, at times frenetic and convoluted, beachy and nightliefy when we got tired of interesting things. We followed her 10/40/50 plan, part of it in her name and one female alias; the middle part in three joint accounts in our own names.

no real tax problem in Jamaica though it would have been in the States; and the remaining half according to my own labyrinthine, Machiavellian, Byzantine system. It occurred to me then that I might be, like the rest of my species, mortal, and I decided to get a lawyer to help me set up a way for Joy Sue and Annette to split my funds if I should get myself deceased. Otherwise, without obvious heirs, I'd just be leaving it to a bunch of governments, Heaven forfend. I needed a Jamaican lawyer anyhow, so I lined up a fine old firm of solicitors left over from colonial days while we were down there.

There would be more trips to make before it was all shipshape, but we decided after a week and a half we'd had all the fun we could endure, so we got ready to return to Wilmington and finish the job by mail.

"What kinda income is this gonna bring us in?" Joy Sue asked as I finished the arduous job of nibbling her left earlobe. It was certainly worth the extra ticket to have the three seats to ourselves.

"It's complex. But the simple answer is that, when we finish the job we've started, we can spend about a hundred grand a year between the two of us without depleting capital. If we keep working and let it sit there

a while and maybe add to it now and then . . .”

“Yeah. Let’s do that. But I’d rather do *small* stuff for a while.”

“Yeah, me too.” I smooched the inside of her wrist just to see if she would make a funny sound. She did.

When we got home we discovered that it had hit the fan.

Stromquist had challenged Ulfson, apparently moments after we’d left the country. The SEC had jumped in with both feet; there were attorneys general of at least three or four states already involved and more on the way. It was shaping up to something much bigger and messier than a mere proxy fight. It was on front pages all over the country, hardly anything else was being discussed at the club, it was mentioned every time I picked up the phone.

Which by itself was a problem for Stromquist and Minicorp, but not insurmountable, and certainly better than being eaten alive as Ulfson had planned. What was bad was that Wall Street had got a bad case of butterflies about the situation. People were unloading Minicorp Series B at an alarming rate, and it was rapidly dropping back toward par. Owners of A stocks were pretty

much standing fast, and for the first time there was a big differential between the two issues.

There was no keeping it from Joy Sue, though I’d have liked to for several reasons. To help me along, good ol’ Irv Cohen showed up at the office one day, which he almost never did, and he was full of it. Though it took him a few minutes to get around to it. He first inspected Joy Sue and offered me a partnership if I’d bring my executive secretary along.

“I *have* a partner, Irv. It’ll be Brown & Witt, Ltd., as soon as we get her credentialed.” I’d had no idea I was going to say something like that. She smirked the sweetest, smuggest little smirk I ever saw on an apparently innocent snub-nosed face.

Then, when he recovered from meeting Joy Sue, he had to start on Minicorp.

“They say Stromquist’s having some credit problems. He’s got reserve now, but if it keeps up he could be in trouble. Big legal fees. A couple of his high-level staff are quitting, somebody told me, I forget who. Suppliers are taking C.O.D. now, no thirty days—they’re not sure Minicorp will be *around* in thirty days. A lot of rumors that he’s got some counterfeit stuff of his own, overruns he’s had

"Don't believe it. You know how rumors fly. Stromquist has been straight arrow since his first corner grocery."

Irv frowned. "I don't believe it all, some of it maybe, but there's enough that do to make it a real bear market."

I leaned on the desk, experiencing one of my rare guilt feelings. So much for good intentions, Joy Sue took it all in, eyes unreadable. When he left she said, "We sorta did that all by ourselves, ditten we?"

"Not necessarily," I answered a little too hastily, and started to launch into a long and circumstantial explanation.

She interrupted me. "Billy, I want my, what was it, hundred and forty thousand. I'm gonna buy Minicorp stocks with it."

"Wait a week and maybe you can get it for a dollar or so."

"That'll be too late, an' you know it. Looky what happen in tin days."

I argued with her for a half hour or more before I realized that I was subtly and soulfully manipulating her, for a rarity, and it took even longer to realize that I had meant to.

"Billy John Brown," she finally said, "you're a stockbroker. Go out and buy me a hundred forty thousand worth of Minicorp, however you do it. You don't even hafta raid one o' your precious bank accounts, just take it out from behind the

plumbin' and I'll sign you some Jamaican checks."

"Joy Sue, don't be ridiculous."

"Ridic'ulous, am I? Ah'll do it myself, if you won't." She left in a huff. I'd been meaning to get her a car of her own, but a five block walk in heels wouldn't kill her.

I kept busy till quitting time, doing a lot of phone and telex work, including some to Jamaica. I hated to start taking down what I'd just set up, but at least it had been fun. And as good a moneymaking team as we were, it was only a delay and not a defeat of my early-retirement plans.

When I got home the dispenser had been put back in crooked. I undid her job, counted the conscientious sixty thousand left in the baggie, and put it back right.

She had already eaten, she informed me curtly when she got home that evening. A *gentleman* had taken her out to dinner. I'd heard Irv called a lot of things before. At least I *hoped* it was Irv. As much as I missed her on the far side of the king-size, I was glad it wasn't the Atlantic. When I woke I found stone-cold bacon and eggs on the table for me. Not as food, as a message.

When I got to 9100 Offices, the generic receptionist signaled me to pick up my phone.

I quickly unlocked the office and answered it.

"Bill, what the *hell* is going on here?" It was, as I'd expected, Irv, the only other broker she knew to speak to. "Your secretary comes in with a wad of bills to choke a hippopotamus and tells me to buy Minicorp—"

"You know how sentimental women can get. You know, family business, American way of life. . . ."

"Bill, you're not telling me something you know."

"Not free to, Irv. I have to talk with my lawyer on an ethics matter before I can say anything. She's exempt, of course, from the, uh, restraints that might possibly affect me."

Forty-eight hours, I figured. I pointedly got rid of Irv after he told me he'd sold her twenty-eight thousand shares on a fifty-point margin, figuring he was safe any way it went.

Not being spoken to for two days, let alone touched in any way whatever, was a desolate experience, but my optimism remained unflustered. I started buying cautiously at 9¼ the next day, and the second day I plunged at 5½.

Then I met Irv at the club for a drink. There were many eyes on me, and ears seemed to be stretching my way. "Now can you talk?" he demanded. The nearer ones started edging in.

I smiled smugly. "I had some dope from so near the horse's mouth that I wasn't sure it wouldn't be considered insider stuff."

"Well, what the hell *was* it?"

"They've got the serial numbers of every phony Minicorp share." If that wasn't true, it would be by the time FedEx made the afternoon delivery. "Ulfsen has them all, the Feds are going over him with a microscope, and he's practically indicted. Rumor has it, though I can't verify it, they're going to nail him for more than just the Minicorp bit." That was a skilled guess, and one I wouldn't mind betting on.

"So you bought, and didn't tell me?"

"So I'm telling you now. You can still get it for a good price. By morning it'll be near normal, I'd predict, and plateaued a couple of points above that by the end of the week."

There were listening ears all around us. Irv downed his drink and headed back to his office. He wasn't the only one.

The rally had begun. Irv got his at 7¾. Next morning it opened at 10¼. New York prices were running about three hours behind ours.

When I got back to the office she was filing her nails. To a very sharp point, it seemed to me. I leaned over to kiss her.

She didn't stab me in the eye with the nail file, but she glared daggers at me as she recoiled. "Please do not touch me. Mr. Brown, after careful consideration, I am tendering my resignation. On the basis of incompatibility and irreconcilable differences. I believe that I have approximately two thousand dollars still due to me. If I may have that, I will stop darkenin' your *door*!" She was near tears.

"What are these 'irreconcilable differences,' Miss Witt?"

"'Cause you're just lettin' li'l ol' Minicorp *sink*, after you *sunk* it, you ol' stinker!" One of the tears trickled out of her eye and she tried to twitch it back in with a corner of her cheek.

"Before you make final plans, how are you going to cover the margin on the twenty-eight thousand shares you bought?"

"Irvin' said he'd see I dittin' git burnt or stung or bit or whatever it was he said. He *also* said if you wasn't treatin' me right I could work for him an' come live at *his* house. He has a *big* place."

Good ol' Irv. I'd have done the same for him, if the girl had been in the Joy Sue class. "Well, before we split the quilt, we'll have to agree on the disposition of our joint holding of a hundred thousand shares of Minicorp B." I showed her the faxes confirming the purchases. "Your

twenty-eight thousand, after a normal delay, started the rally. Irv spread the rumor we had inside info. Then I added more rumors, and started buying myself. Including some purchases made through other brokers. They didn't know what the hell I was doing, but they were glad to take the commission. And they talked. This started a bull market in Wilmington, which quickly spread to New York. Then I placed a couple of phone orders in Chicago, just to be sure the Midwest would get the idea."

She was standing close and smiling. "You mean you meant all along to *ressacue* 'em?"

"Not till you kicked me in the conscience."

She studied my face. "Did you do it for your conscience, or to git me back?"

"I have to live with my conscience. I don't have to livewith you. Unless, of course, you insist."

"Conscience like yours, it needs a fulltime keeper jess to stay awake."

"Are you volunteering for the job?"

She was silent so long I was sorry I'd asked. Finally she spoke. "Ah'm gonna move into a bigger place. Since you're payin', you might as well come along. Just to keep your conscience on the straight an' narrow."

"If I won't be in the way."

"Not at all. Ah might find a use for you, now 'n then."

My proposal that night late, as we snuggled and smooched in the warm dark, pleased her

more than it surprised her. The scam I proposed, though much smaller than the Minicorp caper, was in a way even more outrageous. But that's another story.

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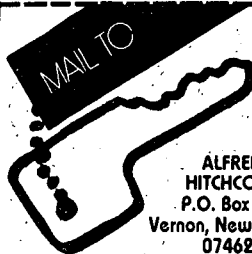
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UNSOLVED

by
Raymond Smullyan

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

"And now, we come to a more interesting case yet," said the King. "Again we have three defendants—A, B, and C. The court knew that one was a knight, one a knave, and one the spy, but it was not known who was which. First the judge asked A, 'Are you the spy?' A answered (yes or no). Then the judge asked B, 'Did A tell the truth?' B answered (again either yes or no).

"At this point, A said, 'C is not the spy.' The judge replied, 'I already knew that. And now I know who the spy is!'

"Who was the spy?"

"Now, just a minute!" cried Alice. "This time you haven't told me what either A or B said!"

"I know," replied the King. "The book didn't tell us that either, but the interesting thing is that it is possible to identify the spy without being told either of those things."

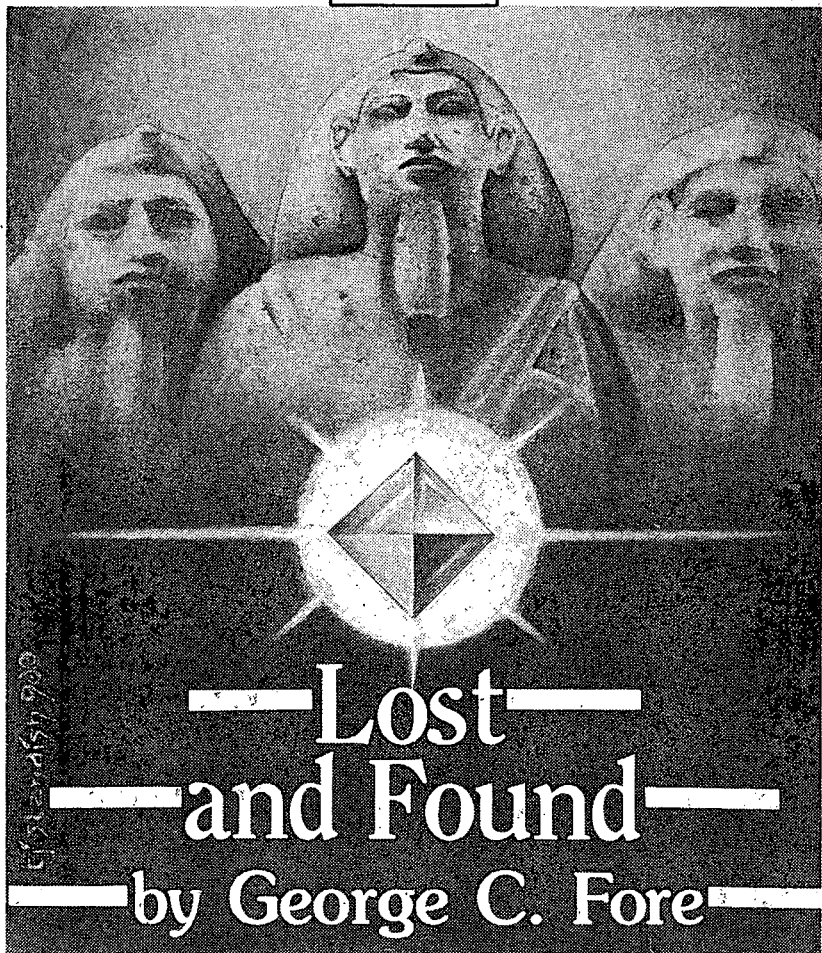
Alice continued to look puzzled.

"You realize," said the King, "that when the judge said that he already knew that C was not the spy, it was purely on the basis of the answers given by A and B."

What is the solution?

See page 149 for the solution to the January puzzle.

"A Still More Interesting Case," from Alice in Puzzle-Land by Raymond Smullyan, copyright © 1982 by Raymond M. Smullyan. Reprinted by permission of William Morrow and Company, Inc.



From where I sat, the luncheon meeting was a disaster. The idea, of course, had been to get the Ridgeway Museum as a client, something that was important to me because, for one thing, it

meant I could get back to doing what I prefer—being a security consultant and confidential investigator rather than a salesman.

It was also important because I wanted to show Uncle

Biggs that I too could bring in some business. Even though my card says DAVID KELLY, PRESIDENT, it's been my Uncle Biggsby who has been responsible for generating most of the business our not-quite-fledgling firm, Security Planners, Inc., enjoys. The director of the museum, Burton Kranzely, was a longtime acquaintance of Uncle Biggs, but I'd been dealing with him personally and, when I thought the time was right, had invited him to join Uncle Biggs and me for lunch to close the deal. But somewhere between the chicken and the cheesecake things went sour.

After the waiter brought coffee and solicited dessert orders, Kranzely sat back in his seat and looked at Uncle Biggsby and me. He was what you'd expect a museum director to be: sixtiesish, balding, and studious. He wore half-frame reading glasses which he kept on a cord around his neck but which he rarely removed, preferring to peer over the tops of them when he needed to. He did so now as he regarded us over his coffee.

"Biggs," he said, "I know you wouldn't steer me wrong, and I have every respect for the abilities of your nephew." He paused to give me a brief smile. "I know we've spent some time going over your proposal, David, and that we gave you the

impression we were ready to go ahead, but after reviewing it with H-T here, we just don't think it's in the best interest of the museum to proceed. I'm truly sorry, but I know you'll understand."

The "H-T" Kranzely referred to was Winston Holmes-Tidley, a representative of the museum's insurance company, a certain well-known international firm. Kranzely had unexpectedly brought him to lunch. I should have known then that things were coming unglued, but Dave Kelly, the eternal optimist, naively thought the insurance guy was there to endorse the notion of our helping to beef up security at the museum. They would, I reasoned, be in favor of anything that might make their paying a claim less likely.

Friend H-T was somewhat younger than Kranzely, with salt-and-pepper hair, blue-gray eyes, a clipped mustache, and a face that seemed to be about eighty percent jawline. While Kranzely spoke he'd been studying his coffee cup with an intensity that would have done justice to a neurosurgical procedure. As Kranzely finished turning down our business, H-T looked up and turned that magnificent chin in my direction.

"We found your proposition

quite, well, interesting, actually," he said. He did not, in fact, sport a bowler or carry a black umbrella, but he came close. His suit was definitely not from this side of the Atlantic, and he spoke with the British standard BBC accent. He pronounced "actually" as if it started with an "e." "But really," he said with a lopsided grin, "our own loss control examiners have been over every inch of the museum. And please don't take offense," he added, holding up a hand, "but we simply didn't feel that your services offered any real value in this case."

"Of course," he continued, "the services you suggest rendering are important. But you must understand we provide many of them ourselves. Our people get actively involved in helping our customers prevent losses. We designed the alarm systems for the new Gems of Antiquity exhibit, for example. And that being the case, we advised against retaining your firm simply to duplicate our efforts."

"No real value . . . simply to duplicate . . ." This was not only a reversal, but a shock, sudden, complete, and quite unexpected. My cup stopped midway to my lips. Coffee slopped over the rim and into my lap. I put the cup down, too quickly, and spilled some more. I dabbed

at it with my napkin. Things were well off the tracks now, and I didn't know how to save them or even how to escape with some dignity intact. But, as usual, Uncle Biggs came to the rescue.

"What utter nonsense," he rumbled, immediately commanding the attention of our two guests. "We know the museum is well protected. Do you think we work with dolts? No, providing security calls for men of intelligence, vision, and eminent practicality."

"Of course, I put you in that category, Burt," he continued in a quieter rumble, and turned to H-T. "And such men realize two truths. The first is that there is no such thing as absolute security, all we can do is live with an acceptable level of risk. Take the Gems of Antiquity exhibit you just mentioned. It contains an exceptionally valuable stone, does it not?"

"Yes," answered Kranzely. "A diamond. The 'Eye of the Gods.' It's a little over twenty carats, which makes it pretty valuable in its own right, even though it's not quite as fine a gem as some others. But it's also the oldest diamond gem in existence, dating from ancient Rome and once purported to have been owned by Cleopatra. That's nonsense, of course. Cleo

died a couple of hundred years before anyone ever owned a diamond, at least as a gem. But the Eye must be considered priceless, I'd say."

"And is it adequately protected?" demanded Uncle Biggs.

"Absolutely," replied Kranzely with a quick glance at H-T.

"But what of other rooms, other artifacts? The same level of precaution? No. They are less valuable, have a higher level of acceptable risk. But we can never eliminate that risk entirely, merely reduce it. Which is what we're proposing, gentlemen: to help reduce that risk... not only of theft, but from other perils as well. Vandalism. Negligence on the part of a visitor. Carelessness or incompetence on the part of museum staff. Or even a simple, everyday accident." He thumped the table with each point on his list, rattling coffee cups and sending a spoon careening off the edge. Other people in the restaurant were looking at us, but Uncle Biggsby seemed oblivious. He settled back and took a sip of his coffee.

"The second truth is that the real basis of reducing risk is your people, not your alarm systems. And that's why our proposal includes helping to train your guards and doing background checks on new em-

ployees. Gadgets are good, but they don't replace competence."

"What you're saying," H-T said stiffly, "is that we should retain your firm to protect our less valuable items from every-day..."

"Bah. What I'm saying is in the security business there is always an element of risk." He raised a hand, holding a quarter between his thumb and forefinger. He waved his hand back and forth a few times with a flourish, and the quarter vanished. "Now, you know I did not use magic to make the coin disappear. But it looked like I did because we all see what we expect to see. You look at an alarm system, say, and call it safe. And to you it is, because you expect it to be. But someone else looks at it and sees gaps. So it pays to have as many minds as possible working to protect something as valuable as your diamond."

When I saw the quarter, I knew the Biggsby brain was in high gear. I'd seen him do this and other tricks before, like the time he squirted a client with disappearing ink from his fountain pen to make a similar point. Once he even set fire to a client's desk to show that fireproof buildings weren't immune from people bringing flammable materials in with them. The "fire" had actually

been some sort of magician's gimmick that made more flash and smoke than actual flame, but it, too, had made the point. The trick also told me that Uncle Biggs was about to pull some sort of stunt, but even then I wasn't ready for what he had in mind.

"There was a newspaper article that detailed the elaborate security and alarm systems you've installed to protect the Eye of the Gods," Uncle Biggsby said more quietly, stroking the tip of his mustache with an index finger. "Modern technology protects ancient gems' was the gist of it, if I'm not mistaken. A very good system, too, I might add. But even so, I'll wager the diamond could be stolen at almost any time."

"Preposterous," H-T bristled. "Nothing short of brute force of military proportions—sufficient to smash through masonry walls—could snatch that diamond from its display, and even in, that case the perpetrators would immediately be apprehended."

"Oh," said Uncle Biggs, "you've got some pretty sophisticated gadgets keeping an eye on the diamond, but none as sophisticated as the human brain. And yet..." he waved a hand, and the quarter reappeared, "it can easily be fooled. And so can your alarms."

H-T and Uncle Biggs glowered at each other, and finally Kranzely said, "Biggs, I know a magician's trick can fool the human eye, but I don't think anyone can fool that alarm system. The diamond's safe." He slid back his chair. "Thank you for lunch, but I'm sorry to say it's still no sale."

Uncle Biggsby had waited until that moment to drop the bomb. He leaned back and regarded Kranzely and H-T through half-closed eyes. "You want me to have the diamond stolen to prove my point?" he asked quietly.

Both men froze. Finally Kranzely croaked, "Surely you're not serious."

"I think," Uncle Biggs said, setting the hook, "there's a man in town who can steal the Eye. You say he can't. Sounds like something a little wager should be able to settle."

"What sort of wager?" H-T demanded, bristling again. He was getting good at it.

"Twelve thousand dollars," replied Uncle Biggs, without hesitation.

"You're insane," exploded H-T. He was beyond bristling this time, but for once I had to agree with him.

"Not really," answered Uncle Biggs calmly. "We figure that's just about what our fees would be for one year. We lose, we go

to work for the museum for free. We get the diamond, you hire us for a year."

"Preposterous," said H-T, muttering now.

"I'll even tell you the date and time of the robbery," Uncle Biggs continued. "You can be there if you'd like. The only thing I will insist on is that you utilize the current alarm system. No special precautions, just business as usual."

For once H-T seemed to be at a loss for words, which was understandable because I was numb myself. Kranzely wasn't, though. "Biggs, I think you're in over your head this time. I'm going to take your wager."

Uncle Biggsby and Kranzely shook hands to seal the bet; H-T simply stood there with his chin stuck out even farther than normal and lips clamped tight. I knew he wanted to protest the whole affair, but couldn't do so without damaging his credibility. Uncle Biggsby had outfoxed him, all right, but it was certainly too soon to count any chickens.

Before we left, Uncle Biggsby scheduled the crime. "Let's see," he said, consulting his pocket calendar, "the museum is closed on Mondays? Good, let's say three weeks from this coming Monday, that's the second week in March. Between noon and, say, two o'clock. That okay?"

He handled the whole thing as if he were making an appointment for a manicure.

Ever since I can remember, my "Uncle Biggs" has seemed to have some sort of nebulous connection with an unnamed group involved in law enforcement or intelligence operations. We were never encouraged to be too curious about it, but as I grew older it became less and less believable. Uncle Biggs is only about five feet seven or eight with a shape generally resembling a bowling ball and, as you have already seen, is given to flamboyant outbursts of theatrics. I had concluded that his personal style was simply too flashy for him to be anything other than, perhaps, an out-of-work actor specializing in playing Falstaff. But whatever he'd been up to most of his life, when I started Security Planners, Inc., I found he had the contacts and the credibility to open doors for us and get the type of business we wanted. Happily, he did just that. So when he said he knew someone who could steal the diamond, I doubted him just a little. Oh, he knew someone who would be willing to try it, and who probably had stolen such things before. But I didn't believe anyone could get by that alarm system.

Like Kranzely, I was con-

vinced that Uncle Bigsby had gone too far. Since I'd been trying to get their business, I had become pretty familiar with the museum. I'd read those same newspaper articles about the security for the Gems of Antiquity exhibit. It was in a windowless room with brick walls and a reinforced concrete floor. Entrances and exits were alarmed, and there was a state-of-the-art motion detection system inside the room. When the exhibit was open, uniformed guards were stationed conspicuously about, and a count of those entering and leaving was taken at all times. The Eye of the Gods was in a separate display case of bulletproof glass. It had a separate alarm that could only be deactivated by someone in another part of the museum, in a sequence of actions that required a second person at the exhibit. The locking mechanism on the case was electrically operated so that if anyone cut power to the alarm systems, the case could not be opened. I was damned if I could see any way to steal that diamond.

During the next three and a half weeks I didn't see much of Uncle Biggs, but then he rarely kept a regular schedule. In fact, it was pretty much business as usual; I had clients to tend to and a business to run, Uncle

Bigsby came and went. If he was concerned about pulling this caper off, he sure didn't show it. The high spot of those weeks seemed to be the arrival of his new business cards.

The day of the theft came at last, sunny and a little cold. It was the type of day that lets you know spring is coming, but not too soon. It must have been just the sort of day that appealed to Uncle Bigsby because he arrived at our office a little before noon, nearly knocked me over with a swat on the back, and bellowed, "David, my boy, come. We have a diamond to steal." All I could think of was the old joke about the Lone Ranger and Tonto being surrounded by Indians. It ends with Tonto saying, "What you mean 'we,' cowboy?" I hadn't a clue as to what Uncle Bigsby had planned.

The Ridgeway Museum is made up of a number of connected buildings, mostly of ivy-covered brick. Its grounds are completely surrounded by a wooded area that is part of the city park system. The museum itself is misnamed because it is actually situated at the bottom of a small depression, with hills gently rising all around.

The newest addition to the museum was a structure of matching brick designed in a compatible architectural style, boasting colonial style windows

of paned glass, two stories high. Once inside, one saw that these windows opened not onto display areas but onto corridors surrounding an inner chamber with solid masonry walls. The Gems of Antiquity were displayed inside this chamber, and it was here, after being admitted by a guard, that we met Kranzely and our old friend H-T.

Being inside a museum when it's closed to the public is a little spooky. Here, in absolute quiet, remnants of ancient times lie in tomblike desertion, as if waiting to be discovered again. Despite the carpeting on the floor, I found myself trying to tiptoe as we entered the room. In the chamber it was even more eerie. Statues and life-sized paintings of ancient Egyptians, Romans, Babylonians, and Lord knows who else were arrayed around the room. All the statues wore jewelry—mostly replicas—of various sorts, apparently to show how it was used in religious and royal life. The eeriness was intensified by the fact that Kranzely had not turned on all the lights as we entered; half the room was still in darkness.

The others must have been similarly affected because we all followed with unusual silence as Kranzely led the way to a display case which was bril-

liantly lit by a spotlight hidden somewhere high above. In the case, all by itself on dark green velvet, was the Eye of the Gods. It was a square-cut diamond, about the size and shape of a key on a computer keyboard. The stone, sparkling in the eerily darkened room, was quite impressive, and we all stopped to admire its ancient beauty.

Uncle Bigsby finally broke the silence. "I'd like you to open the case and close it, resetting the alarm system, just to be sure that it's on and in good working order." He spoke quietly. Even he was affected by the ghosts in the room. "Now, I've made certain arrangements. If we're successful, the diamond won't be stolen in the usual sense, that is, it won't be taken away. It will simply be hidden somewhere else in the building. I'm to leave a card with my initials on it in the case and my accomplice will jot down where we can find the diamond."

H-T swiveled his chin in Uncle Bigsby's direction like a turret on a battleship. He was bristling again. "Now, look here, my man. We cannot have this stone simply lying about . . . do you have any idea what this is wor . . ."

"Nervous, Mr. Tidley?" interrupted Uncle Bigsby. "It's protected by your system, the

museum's closed, your guards are about. We'll call off the experiment if you'd like to concede the issue."

The two of them locked eyes for a moment until H-T snorted scornfully and turned away. We all watched as Kranzely opened the base of the display case with a key and picked up a telephone handset that was in the cabinet. "Ready with the Eye of the Gods," he said into the receiver. He inserted the key into another keyhole inside the cabinet, turned and held it. A moment later we heard a loud click from the bottom of the case and Kranzely reached up and opened the glass top.

Without the glass of its display case, the diamond was even more impressive, throwing off rainbows of color onto the velvet and glittering brightly in the harsh spotlight. Uncle Bigsby moved to the case and reached inside, stopping just before touching the diamond. "May I?" he asked.

Kranzely gave a brief nod, and Uncle Bigsby picked the stone up with his left hand. His right hand rummaged through the pocket of his topcoat and came out with a jeweler's loupe, which he screwed into his eye to examine the diamond.

"I'm no jewelry expert," he said as he peered at the gem. "But if this has any flaws, I

can't see them." He handed the stone and the loupe to Kranzely. "Care to look?"

Kranzely let his glasses dangle on their cord and repeated Uncle Bigsby's examination of the stone. "You know," he said reverently, "every time I look at it, I just have to marvel at the fact that this diamond is nearly two thousand years old, and try to guess at the places it's been and the people who've admired it."

Meanwhile, Uncle Bigs took one of his new Security Planners business cards from a leather card case, scrawled his initials on it with his fountain pen, and placed it carefully in the empty display. He checked his watch. "Gentlemen, it's time."

Kranzely replaced the diamond and closed the case. He used the telephone again to check that the alarm was activated. As we left the room, Kranzely killed the lights, and when I looked back in the darkness I could see the red dots of light from the motion detector units placed throughout the room. No way, I thought. What you mean "we," cowboy?

We agreed to meet back at the museum at two o'clock. "Remember," Uncle Bigsby cautioned, "no extraordinary or unusual precautions. Business as usual." And with that he

bustled off, leaving me to my own devices. I didn't think it particularly appropriate for me to stick around with Kranzely and H-T, so I sought out a deli and again tried to imagine how Uncle Biggs planned to pull this off. At least the sandwich was good.

It was several minutes before two when I returned to the museum and joined Kranzely and H-T in the corridor outside the exhibit. H-T seemed pleased with himself. "Well, Mr. Kelly," he said, "it's been very quiet here. I don't think your uncle has managed too well."

I was trying to think of an answer to this when Uncle Biggs appeared, thundering, "What in the devil are those men doing on the roof?" He was livid. "I thought we had a gentlemanly agreement, and I find you've added guards on the roof. I could see them from the park across the street."

"They're workmen repairing the air conditioning units," H-T replied defiantly.

"Workmen? I didn't know anything about..." Kranzely started to say, looking back and forth between Uncle Biggs and H-T.

"Workmen, my foot," roared Uncle Biggs, ignoring Kranzely. "It's forty degrees outside. No one repairs air conditioners in this weather. We ought to just

declare foul..." finally turning to Kranzely, "May I use your phone?"

"Sure," Kranzely answered. "Use my office. Down this hall, up the stairs, and it's the first door on your left. My secretary, Delores, should be there. She'll show you in."

Uncle Biggs disappeared down the corridor, topcoat flapping behind him. While we waited, I noticed Kranzely eyeing H-T speculatively.

H-T said, "You must realize, Burton, that workmen are generally around doing something, especially when the museum is closed. I just thought it prudent to simulate a more realistic scenario for our little test, and suggested so to your head of security." Kranzely merely nodded.

Uncle Biggs reappeared a few moments later, hands stuck in the pockets of his coat, looking grim.

"Did you reach your, ah, party?" asked Kranzely.

"No answer," replied Uncle Biggs. "Let's have a look."

Ghosts about or not, we wasted no time in getting to the Eye of the Gods display case. There, lying on the velvet beneath the glass, was the diamond and a Security Planners business card.

"Looks like your man didn't get in," said H-T. His impec-

cable British accent made him sound even more smug than he was.

Uncle Biggs ignored him and, hands still in the pockets of his coat, bent over to study the case. "I think my business card has been moved."

We crowded closer. "Moved? ... Might have been ... Not sure."

"Let me open it," Kranzely said, and did so using the key and the telephone as he had before. Uncle Biggsby snatched up the Eye and stepped back, holding the diamond up to the light between thumb and index finger of his right hand. "When we were planning this, there was some talk of using a fake." He moved the stone around in the light. "I don't know," he muttered. He looked down at the case. "The business card! That's not the one I left. My initials aren't on it."

We all looked. It was true, there were no initials on the card.

"Turn it over," he said. "See if there's a message."

Slowly, almost as if in a dream, H-T reached in and flipped the card over with his fingernail. Something was written on the back in red ink. H-T picked it up before I could read it. "It says, 'Look in the director's office,'" he announced.

"Someone take this," Uncle Biggs bellowed. We turned to see him holding the diamond in the palm of his left hand, chin high, out in front of him as if he were presenting a platter of food. He was rummaging through the pocket of his topcoat with his other hand. "I can't find the ..."

Kranzely took the diamond as Uncle Biggs finished his sentence. "Ah, here it is." He produced the loupe and handed it to Kranzely.

The director examined the diamond with the loupe for what seemed like hours though it was probably no more than a few seconds. Still looking through the glass, he mumbled, "Bubbles."

"What?" H-T and Uncle Biggs demanded in unison.

"Bubbles," Kranzely repeated, removing the loupe. "There are bubbles in the middle of this," he said, indicating the diamond. He moved to the glass top of the display case. "This is an imitation," he said as he drew the stone across the glass. The Eye crumbled like soft chalk.

There were several moments of silence, after which I saw a smile begin to play on Uncle Biggs's lips. "Gentlemen," he announced at last, "I saw a coffee pot in Burt's office a few moments ago. I suggest we re-

tire to his lair and enjoy his hospitality while we recover the missing Eye of the Gods."

Kranzely had one of the nicest offices I have ever seen. It wasn't the size or the furniture that made it so but the decor. After all, the director of one of the finest museums on the East Coast has access to more than his share of rare treasures, and these were displayed tastefully throughout the office, each piece given its own space to dominate in its own way. The regular office furnishings were simple: a desk, bookcases, several chairs, a small table on which sat the coffee pot, and a coat rack with two overcoats that I recognized as Kranzely's and H-T's.

On the way in, H-T had questioned Kranzely's secretary Delores, whose desk was just outside the door to Kranzely's office.

"Did anyone else come up here during the last hour or two?" he had asked sharply.

She was a dark-haired woman in her early forties and seemed exceptionally competent. "No," she answered. "I ate lunch at my desk, and no one came by. I did leave several times to make copies, but I was never gone more than two or three minutes."

Inside Kranzely's office, Uncle Biggs hung his coat on the

rack and did the same with mine as Kranzely poured coffee. Uncle Biggs was euphoric, I was still amazed—and a little confused—while H-T showed signs of barely contained anger.

"Before we get too comfortable, I suggest we recover the stone," H-T said. "Biggsby, where is it?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I suggested hiding the stone in Kranzely's office, but not having been here before, I could only make a general suggestion." He sipped coffee.

"Well," H-T demanded, "what was your suggestion?"

"Most desks have pencil cups. I suggested that would be a good place to hide a diamond."

There was, indeed, a pencil cup on Kranzely's desk, and even before Uncle Biggs had finished the sentence, Kranzely had dumped the contents onto his desk.

"There's no diamond here," he said, "but look." He held up a Security Planners business card. Uncle Biggsby's initials were on the front. "Here's your other card."

"That's strange," said Uncle Biggs, a note of concern creeping into his voice. "No diamond? Any message on the card?"

"Yes," Kranzely said. "The guys on the roof weren't part of the deal. I want more money,"

he read. "It's written in the same red ink as the other one."

"Biggsby, I'm warning you ... " H-T started.

Uncle Biggs ignored him. "Let me use your telephone again, Burt."

Kranzely let Uncle Biggs sit at his desk. Uncle Biggs dialed, then spoke into the phone. We all listened to his side of the conversation. "You're in, then. Good. We found your note ... Yes, I know there wasn't supposed to be any extra security," he said, glowering at H-T, "but I didn't know about it, either ... Look, you made a deal. Sometimes you have to deal with unplanned situations, too. You didn't have any real problems, did you? ... Okay, let me see what I can do."

He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and addressed Kranzely and H-T. "He wants five hundred dollars for the, ah, unplanned inconvenience of the 'workmen' on the roof."

"Absolutely unthinkable," H-T said, bristling again. "You know who he is. You tell him that unless he tells us the location of that diamond, we'll have him arrested for stealing it."

Uncle Biggs was unmoved. "I'm afraid it doesn't work like that, Old Bean. You see, we hired him to do what he did.

Move the diamond, not steal it. We have it, it's here. But he figures we made his job more difficult, so unless he's paid for his trouble, he'll make our job more difficult. Otherwise, good luck. Find your own diamond."

"We'll tear the room apart," H-T said defiantly.

"No, you won't," said Kranzely. "Biggs, tell your man that Mr. Tidley's company will pay the five hundred."

Uncle Biggs looked at H-T and raised an eyebrow. H-T, defeated, let out a sigh. "Very well," he said.

"It's a deal," Uncle Biggsby said into the phone and in a moment hung up.

"He said it's in the pocket of a black overcoat. Is that one yours, H-T?" Uncle Biggs asked, nodding toward the coat rack.

H-T beat Kranzely to the coats, fished in the pockets of his own, and came up with the diamond.

We did manage to get some coffee after we'd assured ourselves that this was indeed the real Eye of the Gods and that it was as safely secured as the museum could make it. Uncle Biggs, though, refused to comment on how the theft was accomplished and insisted that we get together for another luncheon meeting the following week. At that time he promised to reveal all and introduce us

to his accomplice. As we left, he reminded H-T to bring a check for the five hundred, and told Kranzely that we'd have our contract there for his signature.

One week later we were all sitting at a table in the restaurant where this had all started. Uncle Biggs had brought along a guest, a small, wiry guy he introduced as Nick. He let us know that Nick may or may not have been his real name. During the meal Uncle Biggs held forth on a variety of topics, none of which had anything to do with the Eye of the Gods. He turned all questions aside with a cheerful, "All in good time." He was driving us all crazy.

Nick, on the other hand, nervously kept his head down, concentrated on his meal, and said nothing.

Finally, when the waiter had brought us all coffee, was convinced we had no need of the dessert cart, and had left us in peace, Uncle Biggs turned to his guest. "Nick, tell these fine gentlemen about our arrangement. But first there is the small matter of some money due. H-T?"

H-T handed over an envelope. "It's made out to 'Cash,'" he said. "Highly irregular."

Nick took it and pocketed it in one swift motion, without bothering to look at the envelope or its contents. He swal-

lowed nervously, making his Adam's apple bob up and down, and licked his lips. "Well," he said, "a few weeks ago, Mr. Bigsby came and said he'd pay me five hundred dollars to make a copy of a diamond. The big square-cut one in the museum. He gave me some pictures of it from the newspaper, and I went to see it twice. He wanted a good one but didn't care about hardness, so I used strontium titanate. I made the copy and gave it to him."

We waited for him to continue. It stretched into an uncomfortable silence. Finally H-T exploded, "Well, good Lord, man, go on!"

"That's all there is," Nick answered, nervously looking at Uncle Biggs.

Uncle Biggs chuckled loudly. "Forgive me, gentlemen, I couldn't resist that. Nick didn't steal the diamond, I did." He looked around the table, meeting the eyes of each of us in turn.

"When we entered the display area for the second time, I was holding the imitation in my left hand, in the pocket of my coat. When you opened the case, you saw me take the diamond in my right hand and hold it up to the light, mumbling about fakes. But when I mentioned the missing initials on my business card, all of you

turned to look. A natural reaction. And when you did, I simply opened my left hand to reveal the imitation and put my right hand in my pocket to pretend to be looking for the loupe. The switch didn't require the least amount of practice or skill. Remember, gentlemen, you see what you expect to see. And the rest was simple stage-dressing."

"But how did the business card get into my pencil cup?" Kranzely asked. "You weren't anywhere near it."

"Sure I was," Uncle Biggs replied. "I had used the phone in your office earlier, remember?"

"But that was the card you left in the case," I said. "I saw you put it there."

"No, the card in Kranzely's office was another one. I wrote the message and my initials on it while sitting at his desk."

"But what about the card in the case?" I asked. "It was moved. And it had the note about Kranzely's office, and your initials were gone. Did you switch it before we left?"

"With all of you looking? Good Lord, no. I'm not that good. It wasn't moved. I simply said it was and you accepted it as true, especially after you saw the writing on the back. But that message was there when I put the card in the case earlier. I thought, correctly, that no one

would think to look at the back of my business card before the 'theft.'"

"What about your initials?" Kranzely asked.

Uncle Biggs turned to me. "David, tell them about my initials."

Everyone, even Nick, was looking at me. I drew a blank. Then it hit me . . . "The fountain pen," I said. "I've seen you use disappearing ink in it."

"Precisely," roared Uncle Biggs happily. "Disappears completely when it dries . . . and available these days at any toy store. They even sell water pistols full of it."

"And," I finished, "you put the diamond in H-T's coat pocket when you hung up our coats in Kranzely's office, and you faked the phone call to Nick here. And you were just playing that whole business with the guys on the roof by ear, after you saw them there."

Uncle Biggs smiled. "Well, I still owed Nick here his five hundred dollars."

"I think you lost your bet, Mr. Biggsby," H-T said coldly. "You may have fooled us with a cheap trick, but you said you were going to show us a weakness in our security system. You haven't done that."

"Oh, but indeed I have," Uncle Biggs replied, very serious now. "When I saw the article

you allowed to be published about your alarm system, I spotted your weakness right away. Overconfidence. Please understand that no . . . and I mean *no* . . . system is one hundred percent foolproof. To think otherwise is foolish. A true thief, bright, resourceful, dedicated, may just be able to spot an opening. Especially if he is not constrained by time, or by any reluctance to damage property or harm people, if necessary. Which is why one of the cardinal rules is not to disclose the details of your security systems. Tip the odds in your favor, let thieves deal with unknowns. When you let those details be printed in the newspaper, I knew I could take advantage of that overconfidence. And I did."

"I still say you didn't prove a thing. It was just a cheap trick," H-T muttered. "And I'm going to stop payment on that check," he added, nodding toward Nick.

"I think overconfidence is the wrong word, Biggs," Kranzely said, looking at H-T. "I think pride is more correct. You still don't get it, do you, H-T? We

think we have such a dandy alarm system, we bet Biggs that he can't steal the diamond. And on the day and at the time he says he's going to steal it, we open up the case and literally hand him the stone. Twice, in fact. I think he proved a lot.

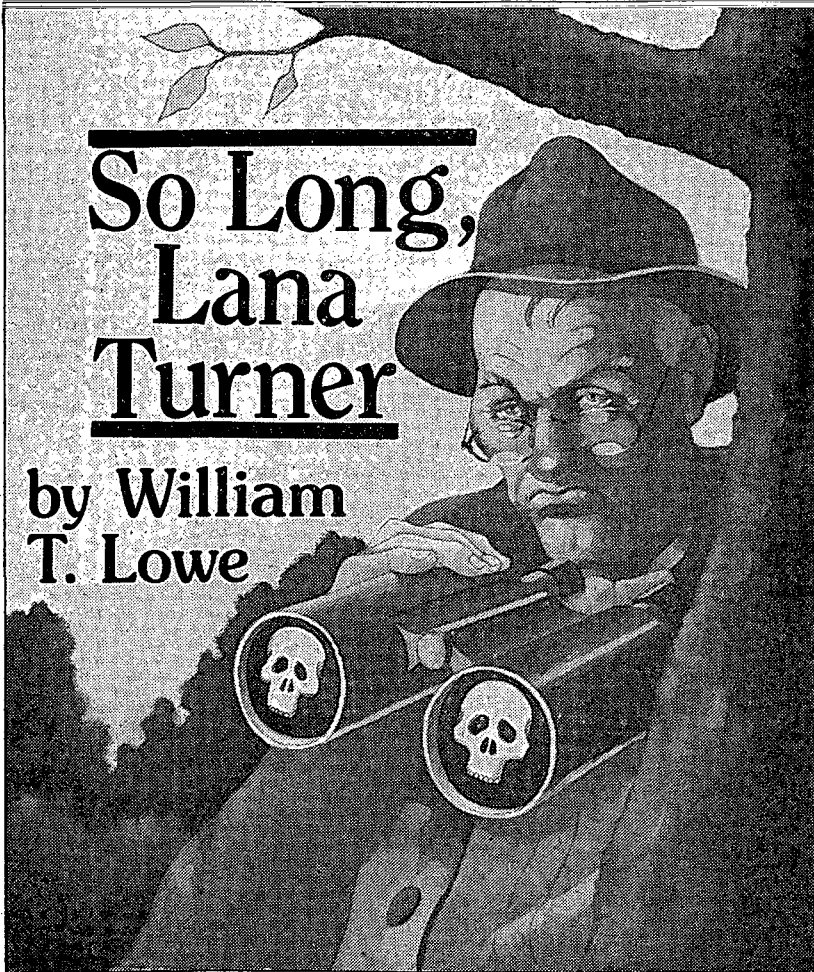
"Now, about that check. I haven't forgotten about those 'air conditioning' fellows on the roof last week. I'd hate to deal with an insurance company that didn't live up to its word or honor its obligations. You can stop payment on the check if you like, but I'll tell you this. You do and you'll find the Ridgeway Museum with another insurance company.

"David," he said, turning to me, "let's have that contract. I'm ready to sign, and I bet we'll be able to talk our insurance firm into some adjustment of our premium in light of our extra security measures."

So this luncheon meeting was also a disaster . . . for H-T. But someday, I'll have to show Uncle Biggs that I can bring in a new account by myself. I'll just have to find one that doesn't require me to steal a diamond first.

So Long, Lana Turner

by William
T. Lowe



“**T**his is not a simple car theft,” I declared. “I think you may have a major crime on your hands here, officer.”

“Let’s hope not, sir,” the young trooper said politely.

“Well, you just wait and see if you don’t.” I knew I sounded peevish, but I couldn’t help it. First I’d had to walk almost two miles out of my way to call the troopers, and then wait almost an hour, and then when one

shows up he looks like just a rookie.

I pointed at my evidence. "It's not just the New Jersey license plates up here in northern New York. It's the man's empty wallet. It's the safe deposit box key that was hidden. And the facial tissue with lipstick on it. Or maybe that's blood. All that looks mighty suspicious to me!"

"Yes, sir," he said, still very polite. "And you found these things over there in the high grass?" He made it sound like only a senile old man would go poking around in tall grass and weeds.

"I told you. I pick up empty cans." I shook my plastic bag of empties. "And bottles, too."

"Yes, sir. What makes you think these items are connected with each other, sir?"

"Because they weren't here yesterday afternoon," I said triumphantly.

We were standing on the side of a road about two miles north of where I live in Clinton County, New York. It's a simple two-lane road that runs between the village of Fountain and the larger town of Keeseville. There's a little turnout there, just a place to pull off the highway to stretch your legs or switch drivers or change a baby's diaper. It's small, only big enough for three cars at a time, surfaced with gravel and out-

lined with big stones. No picnic tables, and only one trash bin that hasn't been emptied for a year.

The turnout doesn't offer much in the way of scenery, but you can see the Adirondack Mountains to the south, and if you climbed a tree, you could see Vermont across the lake to the east. It was June but a nice breeze kept the black flies away.

"The sun was shining on an empty beer can," I explained again, "and that led me to find these things. I thought it was peculiar that they should all be here at the same time, so I walked down to Tim's Esso and called your dispatcher. That's a mile more than I usually walk." I didn't mean to sound so surly; it was just that I was excited. I'm a widower; I live with a married daughter and I build bird houses. Life is pretty dull, but now out of pure luck I was about to be involved in a police investigation.

"I'm sorry about that, sir," the young trooper said. "You could have waited for me at the service station."

"Oh, that's all right." I could tell he was sincere. "I'll cut back some tomorrow."

After I made the call, I'd walked back to the turnout to wait. I was sitting on a big rock when the New York State Police car pulled up, a dark blue

sedan with a broad gold band on the sides and the state seal on the doors. The officer who got out was very young. I don't know why I had expected someone more my own age.

His name tag read MARION, S. He was tall and lanky, and I had to admit he seemed competent enough. He was wearing the new state police sidearm, the Glock 9mm semi-automatic pistol; I had read about it in the paper.

Right away I had to be entered in his notebook.

"Your name, sir?"

"Hank Foster."

"Is that H-e-n-r-y?"

"I prefer H-a-n-k."

"You happened to be walking by when you found some items you thought were suspicious?"

"No, I did it on purpose. I mean, I walk for my health."

"And you're retired, sir?"

I wanted to rattle my bag of empties at him and say I was in the salvage business, but I didn't. I admitted I was retired.

I put the things I had found on the hood of the trooper car. The wallet was the conventional type that goes in a hip pocket with pockets for credit cards and so on. This one was good leather, not plastic, and it was curved and flattened to indicate that it had been carried in a pocket for quite a while. Still, it was not worn or scuffed,

not ready to be discarded. No initials on the outside, no identification on the inside.

Officer Marion S picked it up. "Maybe some tourist just bought himself a new wallet and stopped here for a break and decided to transfer his stuff from his old one to the new one." He didn't sound like he really thought that was what had happened, and I didn't either.

"No, I don't think so," I said. "He wouldn't forget his key." I held it up to make my point.

Someone had cleaned out the wallet before he threw it away, but he missed one thing. I almost missed it myself. Jammed down in one end, behind the flap where large bills go, was a flat safe deposit box key. You couldn't see it and you would never know it was there unless you happened to feel it with your fingers. No bank name; just three stamped numerals that must be the number of the box.

Marion S put the key in a small envelope and picked up one of the license plates. They were this year's issue, in perfect condition, not defaced in any way.

"You'll want to contact the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles," I began, "to find out who these plates were registered to..." Marion S gave

me the same look I used to give a student who had said something quite obvious. I shut up, and we looked at the plates in silence.

I guessed he had the same questions in mind as I had. Why stop out here on the highway and take the plates off a car and throw them away? Answer: because someone is looking for that particular car. But why then attract attention by driving around in a car with no license plates on it? Answer: you wouldn't. You would have another set of plates ready to put on the car. Did the same person who owned the car also own the now-empty wallet? I didn't have an answer for that.

The young trooper was walking around the turnout, looking at a few old tracks in the gravel and the white painted stones that needed painting again. I stood by the trooper car and kept quiet.

He came back and picked up the New Jersey plates again. "You know, Mr. Foster," he said carefully, "there's a lot of cars that cross the border up at Champlain. Both ways. And not all tourists, if you know what I mean."

"I know," I said, but I hadn't thought of it before. Of course he meant all the smuggling that goes on in and out of Canada. Champlain isn't two hours

away from this spot. There are ten border crossings in New York and Vermont, and Champlain probably is by far the busiest. Customs and the Border Patrol have their hands full. Smugglers use pleasure boats on the lake and the Amtrak train, but the favorite means is the private car. The biggest volume is in cocaine.

"I'll put the word about these plates on the computer, but chances are the car these belonged to is long gone. Up in Quebec or down in West Palm."

He glanced around the turnout again. "As for the rest of it, Mr. Foster, I think it's just coincidence."

I couldn't say anything to that. If there had been a crime, a murder perhaps, and if it was connected to cocaine smuggling, Officer Marion S couldn't discuss it with me. I was a civilian, and to him a pushy one at that. But I was sure of one thing: whatever was going on, I wanted to be in on it.

I tried to sound sheepish, which is not easy for me to do. "I guess you're right, officer." I paused for a moment to change the subject. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"What's the 'S' for? Steve or Sam?"

"Steve."

"When you find out about

those plates, will you let me know, Steve, please? I'll be here tomorrow."

He grinned at me. "Sure thing, Hank."

He picked up my trophies and drove away. I picked up my bag of empties and started home. I was jubilant. This had been a big event for me and it wasn't over yet; I still had my foot in the door.

A car passed me on the way to Keeseville. The driver was Lana Turner. I caught a glimpse of her bright blonde hair and her cheerful smile. I waved and she waved back.

Lana Turner isn't her real name. She's a young woman who reminds me of the sweater girl queen of my undergraduate days. About six weeks ago a car stopped alongside me on the highway and the driver leaned out to ask me a question. She was a young woman with great natural beauty—blue eyes, cute chin, a generous mouth. Her hair was brass blonde, and she wore a tight yellow sweater. I gave her the name Lana Turner.

She asked me where the Page place was, and I told her. She thanked me and smiled before she drove away. It was the special smile pretty young women can give to older men. It's warm and open and unguarded because they don't have to be wary of being misunderstood or

thought flirtatious. It's a very rare smile, and one that a lonely old man will treasure.

I was dog-tired when I got home; those extra two miles hadn't been in the energy budget.

That night I went to sleep thinking about that empty wallet. What became of the credit cards and the baby pictures and the other trivia that must have been in it? Why would anybody stand on a highway in plain sight and clean out another man's wallet? Answer: he was looking for something and he was in a hurry to find it. What was so important? Answer: not cash; he would have found that right away and heaved the wallet with everything else inside it. It had to be something small, like a claim check, or a receipt. Or the hidden key he didn't find.

So what did happen to the contents, the bits and pieces of someone's identity? Answer: they were still there, somewhere around the turnout. Why was I so sure? Whoever had taken the wallet in the first place had been careless. First, he didn't find the key. Then he didn't dispose of the wallet very well; anybody could have found it. So he would have been careless about the little, unimportant things. And I would find them.

If I was lucky, I would have something else to show Trooper Steve Marion this afternoon. He would be glad to have me helping him on this case. I picked up my plastic bag and started down the road.

I am doing all this walking to avoid an operation I don't want to have, by the way. Last fall my seventy-year-old heart staged a mutiny. An angiogram showed that the left side was not working right; an artery was silted up or something. A cardiac specialist young enough to be my grandson told my daughter and me there was nothing to be too alarmed about; he did bypass surgery all the time and almost always successfully.

The bypass job didn't sound good. First they saw through the middle of your rib cage and make an opening large enough to hide a football. Then they root around and find the diseased artery and chop it out. Then they splice in a vein they have pirated from one of your legs. I said no. We negotiated; my daughter and the doctor on one side; me on the other. I won a six-month postponement during which I promised to eat sensibly, go to Sunday school, and exercise moderately.

That's what I'm doing. I walk about three miles every day. Of course I can't repair the dam-

age to that one artery, but I can make the others work harder. The doctor says I'm still a prime candidate for a heart attack, but I do feel better.

That's how this stretch of road became an extension of my front yard. I know every crack and bump, every weed and tree. The empty cans and bottles began to bother me. At first I picked them up and threw them farther back in the bush. Then I began to save them. If I am going to spend so much time on this road, by thunder it is going to be clean.

Now I carry a bag for the empties. A local charity redeems them, and the money from the deposits goes to a children's hospital. There is a tiny sense of accomplishment, and I don't care what the natives think. They're as bad about littering as the tourists. Worse, because they live here.

On my exercise route I pass the Page place. This is a large garage set back from the road. A sign over the door reads PAGE AUTO REPAIR. Several cars are always parked in front and by the side of the building. A large field in the rear is crowded with other cars, new and old, kept, I assumed, to provide repair parts.

Farther back is the Page residence, a one story frame house. A small house trailer is parked

on one side. There is a scraggly flower bed with a concrete bird bath. The house needs paint, the yard needs raking.

There always seemed to be activity around the garage. I knew Walter Page by sight, and if I saw him as I walked by, I would wave and he would wave or nod in return. He was a heavysset man with a ragged black beard. His son, Walt Junior, was one of those unfortunate kids whose life was already over.

He had been a football star in high school and had his picture in the paper twice. After graduation he could at least have gone into one of the armed services, but he didn't. Now he worked in the family garage and would never see the outside of Clinton County. The boy who had been so fast on his feet now walked with a flatfooted step and was getting heavy like his father.

Where Lana Turner fit into this family I didn't know. She must have been kin from somewhere, come for a long stay or maybe permanently. After she arrived a few weeks ago, the Pages brought in the second-hand house trailer that was parked beside the house; I assumed that was her living space.

Lana must have done the shopping for the household; I saw her every day or so driving

back and forth into town. I felt sorry for her. She was too pretty to be stuck up here in the mountains. If she stayed, she would wind up like so many other young girls: too short a youth, too few choices, fated to marry a man who worked with his hands instead of his head.

"Pretty young woman," I wanted to say to her, "don't waste your life here. Don't let the world leave you; catch up while there's still time." I never spoke to her, of course. It was just an old man's thought as he trudged his endless miles. But I would wave, and she would wave back, and smile at me.

At the turnout I was lucky. The trash bin was the obvious place to start searching and in twenty minutes I had found three credit cards and a driver's license, all issued in the same name. They were in the bottom of the bin; the credit cards bent double and the license ripped in two. Digging for them was a filthy job, but I didn't mind. I was paying my dues in the detective business.

These things had to be from the wallet I found yesterday. Someone had stood right here and gutted the wallet, probably dropping them on the ground. Then he picked them up and rammed them down the side of the trash bin as far as he could

reach. That might have seemed safe enough, but it was a careless way to try to hide a person's identification.

I sat down on the big rock to examine my discoveries. The credit cards didn't tell me much; the license was the jackpot. It was a buff-colored New York license issued to a Thomas Swinney with a post office box address in Syracuse, New York. His height was five ten, his eyes brown, his age thirty-eight. The photo was too tiny to show much except a jowly face with a thin black mustache and hair. He could have been anything from a bartender to a truck driver.

I was delighted. I couldn't wait to introduce Mr. Thomas Swinney to my friend Steve Marion, the trooper. Even if this wide spot in a back road had been the end of the line for him.

When Steve arrived, I stood up. "Howdy, Mr. Foster," he said. I had hoped he might say something like "Howdy, partner."

"Those license plates were from a stolen car, all right."

"Yes," I said, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice, "and this may just be the man who stole it."

Steve was impressed with my finds. He didn't waste any time; he got on the radio in his car

and asked for any available information. He wasn't being polite now; he was all business.

I sat on my rock and waited. I was sure we were on the track of some criminal activity. This area has a history riddled with crime. The road I walked on every day had seen its share of criminals. During Prohibition it was one of the roads bootleggers used to transport whisky from Canada down to Albany and on south to New York City. Big touring cars, loaded so heavily their springs were flat, crept down it at night to hide in barns during the day while the cargoes were split up into other cars and driven south.

Illegal liquor was big business then, but it couldn't hold a candle to the smuggling today. Illegal aliens get the most newspaper coverage. "Sixteen foreign nationals discovered in false floor of truck." They come from half the countries of the world to try their luck with the Border Patrol. Cigarette smuggling goes on constantly, but the customs agents can usually spot the contraband from fifty paces away.

The biggest game of all these days is narcotics smuggling. The wave of cocaine has swept north from Florida and reached into Canada. It travels north across the border by courier, and payment in the form of cash

comes down, again by courier. Like cash, cocaine is small in bulk, easily concealed, worth more than its weight in gold.

Interstate 87 is our main north-south artery, since it runs from Albany to Montreal, four lanes all the way. But, as in Prohibition days, it is more discreet to use side roads for moving a load of coke or cash. And, as in the old days, the one place strange cars can go in and out unnoticed is the friendly neighborhood auto repair shop. Quite suddenly I thought of the Page place, just a mile away.

"Thomas Swinney's got a record. Grand theft auto." I jumped at Steve's voice behind me. "Sorry, Hank," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's all right," I said quickly. "So he's got a record? And I suppose you found out he's missing?"

Steve was puzzled. "How'd you know that? Yes, his P.O. says he doesn't know where Swinney is."

"His P.O.?"

"His parole officer. Says Swinney hasn't reported in the last month or so."

"Well, he's not missing. He's up here. We've just got to find his body."

Steve gave me a long look. I was afraid of what he might be thinking. Busybody old man . . . lives on TV shows . . . got lucky

with a wild guess . . . Suddenly I thought Steve was going to tell me to forget the whole thing and go home.

Instead he asked me, quite seriously, "Why do you think this subject is dead?"

"Because," I said as carefully as I could, "somebody has tried very hard to hide the fact that Swinney was here. And somebody knows that other people will want to know where Swinney is."

Steve listened, but he shook his head. "You're reaching, Hank."

"Maybe, but I don't think so. Swinney didn't just happen to lose his wallet. Some kid didn't just happen to find it and empty it." I shook my head. "Swinney was important for something he had or something he knew. Remember the key, Steve."

By now we were sitting side by side on the rocks, Steve with his cap pushed back, me rubbing my bald spot where the sun had gotten to it. Steve looked at me thoughtfully.

"Where do you think this alleged body might be found?"

I had given this some thought; I was ready for him. "Remember now, this person, the killer, is careless, an amateur. He's got a body on his hands, or rather, in his car. Maybe he's panicky because he didn't pick a better time and place, or be-

cause pretty soon he will be missed from wherever it is he's supposed to be.

"Maybe he thinks of Lake Champlain. Certainly not far away and certainly deep enough. But this time of year the boat launches are crowded and he's sure to be seen.

"The Civil War iron mines around Palmer Hill are less than an hour from here, but you can't drive right up to the old shafts. You would have to carry or drag the body a long way. That would take time, and there's always the chance of being seen.

"Then he thinks of the old granite quarry on Route 9 below Fountain. Once you move a couple of sawhorses out of your way, you can drive up pretty close, and one pit is full of water. A few rocks in the pockets and that's the last anyone would ever see of Mr. Thomas Swinney."

Steve tugged on his cap. "We've got no real solid reason to think Swinney was killed around here." I was glad he said "we." "I don't have much to take to the lieutenant or the BCI."

I knew that meant the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. "Look, Steve," I said earnestly, "you've got a known felon, disappeared under suspicious circumstances, probably connected to the narcotics trade."

"What makes you think that?"

"It figures. Boosting cars and running dope go hand in hand. I read the papers."

"It's not very much," Steve said, "but I'll lay it out for the lieutenant." He stood up and started toward his trooper car. "Is there anything else, Hank?"

The sun was hot and I was tired. "Yes. Drive me home, will you? It's time for my nap."

The next morning I got an early start. I climbed a fence and went cross-country, carrying an old pair of binoculars. I wanted to check on something at the Page place. In half an hour I was strolling along the highway as usual. I heard a car behind me and hoped it might be Lana Turner. I had missed seeing her yesterday.

It was Steve. He motioned for me to get in the front seat with him. "The Wilmington patrol picked up a body early this morning," he told me.

"Was it Swinney?"

"It was him." Steve tapped the radio. "They just got confirmation on his fingerprints."

I tried hard to appear casual. "So he went for a swim in the quarry."

"Nope," Steve said. "He was high and dry." I twisted around to face him and saw him grinning at me.

"Relax, Hank. You were close enough. A couple of geology students found the body on the road into the quarry late yesterday, and they phoned it in." Steve told me the students had been prospecting around when they saw a car dump something and drive off. Apparently the driver saw them and got panicky. The students couldn't identify the car or the driver.

"How was Swinney killed?"

"Blow on the head. Something like a jack handle or a poker. Dead about two days, like you figured."

"Anything in his pockets that might indicate what he was doing here?"

Steve shook his head. "A pair of needle-nose pliers and some short pieces of electrical wire. Stuff you might use to hotwire a car. He must have been good at that."

From the way he was looking at me I realized Steve was holding something back. "Come on, Steve. What else have you got?"

"You remember that safe deposit box key? It was Swinney's, all right, in a Syracuse bank. They got a court order to open it, and guess what they found. Ninety-three thousand dollars in cash."

My mouth dropped open. "Wow! That takes Mr. Swinney out of the bush leagues." I thought about it. "He couldn't

make that kind of money stealing cars, could he?" Steve shook his head. "Then there's your narcotics connection, Steve."

"Yep. We thought of that."

We drove along slowly. The sun was already hot, and the top of Whiteface Mountain gleamed in the distance. I was afraid that at any minute the radio would send Steve off on other business, and I had something else to throw at him.

"Steve, you remember you said those New Jersey plates belonged to a blue two-door Dodge Diplomat? Well, I know where that car is. It's in the field behind the Page place."

He frowned at me. "You couldn't possibly know where that individual car is, Hank."

"Hear me out now. This morning I sneaked around there with this pair of glasses. That Dodge is sitting there right now."

Steve shook his head. "They probably built fifty thousand of that model and in that color scheme."

"So what?"

"It would be stupid to keep a hot car right there on the place."

"What better place to keep a stolen car than in a field of other cars? And especially if you plan to use it again."

Steve was deliberately dragging his feet. "You'd have to check the vehicle serial number

to know it was the same car."

"Then you'll need a search warrant, won't you?"

He looked at me without speaking and I was afraid I had pushed too hard, but I kept on. This police business was exhilarating; I couldn't stop.

"You're not just looking for a stolen Dodge, Steve. Tell your lieutenant you're looking for a car that's been used to carry cocaine across the border. Maybe bring cash back into the States.

"During Prohibition they used to take the seats out of those big old Packards and Studebakers to bring down cases of scotch from Canada. Now they're running cocaine up and hiding it in spare tires and seat cushions and under the hood . . ."

"I know all that," Steve interrupted.

"That pair of pliers and electrical wire they found on Swinney. What does that suggest? Maybe he had figured out a new hiding place in a car. Not the radio, that's too small, but maybe the stereo speakers. Pull them out, stash the dope in the space, put the covers back on . . ."

Steve looked at me appraisingly. "You're guessing again, Hank. I admit you've been guessing pretty good, but you're guessing."

I was feeling so good I was absolutely reckless. "It's called

deduction, Officer Marion. Basic deduction."

"Speculation," he said. "Pure and simple speculation." He put his hands on the wheel. "I've got to go. Drive you home?"

"No, thanks. I need the exercise. Tell me, Steve, are you going to try for a warrant?"

"I'll see what the drug enforcement boys say. Chances are they'll go for it. And to tell you the truth, Hank, that Page outfit has been known to dabble in stolen cars. They chop them up for parts." He reached for the ignition key. "I'll be in touch."

"Hang on a minute." There was something on my mind, and I had to speak up now.

"Steve, there's a young lady who lives on the Page place. Some kind of distant cousin, I think. She seems like a nice girl, and I don't think she could possibly have anything to do with whatever might be going on over there." I paused and glanced at Steve. He sat quietly, waiting for me to finish. "Anyway, I feel sorry for her. Old Mrs. Page can't be much company for her, and there she is, a single, attractive young girl there with a hardshell uncle and that young stud Walt Junior . . ."

Steve held up his hand to stop me. "Who are you, Tennessee Williams? I get the picture." He

standing grin. "All right, if we go in for a look around, I'll keep her out of it."

"Thanks, Steve."

I got out and he drove away. Now I felt better. I couldn't protect Lana Turner myself, but Steve had said he would look out for her. This detective work might be fun, but I wouldn't want to create any problems for the pretty young woman with a kind smile for an old man.

I felt so good I walked an extra mile on the way home.

Things moved fast after that. The next morning Steve said, "We got the warrant to search the Page place. The lieutenant says he'll have my hide if we come up empty."

"Don't worry. Tell him I'll help write up your commendation."

"Some drug enforcement boys will be here at noon. We'll go in then." Steve was perfectly relaxed; I hadn't been so excited in years. A real police raid, just like in the movies.

"About the raid, Steve," I said, trying to sound as calm as he did, "will I be issued a side-arm, or am I going in strictly as an observer? Could I bring a camera along?"

Steve just stared straight ahead through the windshield. I wondered why he didn't an-

swer my question, and I was about to repeat it.

"You've been a big help on this thing, Hank," he said finally. I noticed his face was getting red. "But you can't go with us."

I couldn't go? I was stunned. It was like a kick in the stomach. Of course they didn't want an old man along. Get out of the way; let the professionals take over. This is the real world; who needs a has-been schoolteacher. My own face got red. I opened the door and stepped out.

"Wait a minute, Hank."

"Save it, Steve," I snapped. I was furious but I was more hurt than mad. I had trouble breathing. I started down the side of the road and Steve followed me.

"Hold it, Hank. Please." I stopped and turned around. There was a strained look on Steve's young face. "Hank, take away thirty years and you'd be a great partner."

All right, it wasn't his fault. This was police work, and I was a civilian. "Thanks, Steve." I started down the road. "See you around, son."

Then a giant belt cinched itself around my chest and choked the breath out of me and a thousand needles stabbed into my left arm. The sky tilted violently and I blacked out. I think Steve caught me before I hit the pavement.

I didn't know anything else for three days. Steve got me to a hospital in time, and the repair work on my heart was successful. I won't be walking so much any more, but Steve and I are planning to do some fishing real soon. He told me the details of what I missed.

The troopers and the federal agents had their raid on the Page property and found things pretty much as Steve and I predicted. The DEA knew the crime families were delivering cocaine into Canada by concealing it in automobiles. They brought the cash payments down the same way. The families didn't trust each other completely, so they switched cars and cargoes frequently on the run from Florida to Canada and back again.

The Page place was just one of many transfer spots. Drivers were changed frequently, too, and that's where Thomas Swinney came on board. He made a number of trips between the Page place and other points in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The spare license plates were just tools of the trade.

Swinney had made a lot of money and bragged about it, and that got him killed. By

Walt Junior, who was jealous of Swinney's attentions to Lana Turner.

I guess I was wrong about her. Her real name was Judy something. She had a husband doing eight to twelve years in Dannamora. She was the real boss of the Page operation; the mob had planted her there to protect its interests, and she made a lot of the runs into Canada.

It seems she hated the mountains and she elected Thomas Swinney and his bankroll to be her ticket out of the boondocks. But one night up at the turnout, Walt Junior dissolved the partnership with a piece of angle iron. He searched for a clue to Swinney's money, but he was careless and didn't find the key. He and his father and an uncle are out on bail, awaiting trial.

So is the pretty young woman who reminded me so much of my college dreamgirl, Lana Turner. I can still see that bright blonde hair and that warm open smile. I can't believe I was entirely wrong about her. Anyone that pretty can't be all bad.

So long, Lana Turner. It was nice knowing you.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Frontier — Guards —

by H. Russell Wakefield

“What a charming little house!” said Brinton, as he was walking in from a round of golf at Ellesborough with Lander.

“Yes, from the outside,” replied Lander.

“What’s the matter with the inside—Eozoic plumbing?”

“No; the ‘usual offices’ are neat, if not gaudy. Spengler would probably describe them as ‘contemporary with the death of Lincoln,’ but it’s not that—it’s haunted.”

“Is it, by jove!” said Brinton, gazing up at it. “Fancy such a dear little Queen Anne piece having such a nasty reputation. I see it’s unoccupied.”

“It usually is,” replied Lander.

“Tell me about it.”

“During dinner I will. But you seem to find something of interest about those windows on the second floor.”

Brinton gazed up for a moment or two longer, and then started to walk back in silence beside his host. In a few minutes they reached Lander’s cottage—it was rather more pretentious than that—an engaging two-storied structure added to and modernized from time to time, formerly known as “The Old Vicarage” and rechristened “Laymer’s.” Black and white and creeper-lined, with a trim little garden of rosetrees and mellow turf, two fine limes, and a great yew, impenetrable and secret. This little garden melted into an arable expanse, and there was a lovely view over to some high Chiltern spurs. The whole place just suited Lander, who was—or it might be more accurate to say, wanted to be—a novelist; a commonplace and ill-advised ambition, but he had money of his own and could afford to wait.

James Brinton, his guest for a week and a very old friend, occupied himself with a picture gallery in Mayfair. A very small gallery—one rather small room, to be exact—but he had admirable taste and made it pay.

Two hours later they sat down to dinner. “Now then,” said Brinton, as Mrs. Dunkley brought in the soup, “tell me about that house.”

“Well,” replied Lander, “I have had, as you know, much more experience of such places than most people, and I consider Pailton the worst or the best specimen I have heard or read of or experienced. For one thing, it is a ‘killer.’ The majority of haunted houses are harmless, the peculiar energy they have absorbed and radiate forth is not hostile to life. But in others the radiation is malignant and fatal. Pailton has been rented five times in the last twelve

years; in each case the tenancy has been marked by a violent death within its walls. For my part, I have no two opinions concerning the morality of letting it at all. It should be razed to the ground."

"How long do its occupants stick it out as a rule?"

"Six weeks is the record, and that was made by some people called Pendexter. That was three years ago. I knew Pendexter *père*, and he was a courageous and determined person. His daughter was hurled down the stairs one night and killed, and I shall never forget the mingled fury and grief with which he told me about it. Previous to that he had detected eighteen different examples of psychic action—appearances and sounds—several definitely malignant. The family had not enjoyed one single day of freedom from abnormal phenomena."

"How long since it was last occupied?" asked Brinton.

"It has been empty for a year, and I am inclined to think it will remain so. Anyone who comes down to look at it is given a pretty straight tip by one or other of us to keep away."

"Does it affect you violently?"

"I have never set foot in it."

"What? You, of all people!"

"My dear Jim, just for that very reason. When I first discovered I was psychic, I felt flattered and anxious to experience all I could. I soon changed my mind. I found I experienced quite enough without any need for *making* opportunities. I do to this day. Several times I have had a visitor in the study here after dinner, an uninvited guest. And it has always been so. I have many times heard and seen things which could not be explained in places with perfectly clean bills of psychic health. And one never gets quite used to it. Terror may pass, but some distress of mind is invariable. Any person gifted or afflicted like myself will tell you the same. It seems to me sometimes as if I actually assist in evoking and materializing these appearances, that I help to establish a connection between them and the place I inhabit, that I am a most unpleasant kind of lightning conductor."

"Is there any possible explanation for that?"

"Well, I have formed one, but it would take rather a long time to explain, and may be quite fallacious. Anyhow, there has never been any need for me to visit such places as Pailton, and I keep away from them if I can."

"Would you very much object to going in for a minute or two?"

"Why?"

"Well, I have been bothered all my life about this business of

ghosts. I have never seen one; in a sense I 'don't believe in them,' yet I am convinced you have known many. It is a maddening dualism of mind. I feel if I could just once come in contact with something of the kind I should feel a sense of enormous relief."

"And you'd like me to conduct you over Pailton?"

"Not if it would really upset you."

"It would be at your own risk," said Lander, smiling.

"I'll risk it!"

"You mustn't imagine that you can go into a disturbed spot such as this and expect to see about ten ghosts in as many minutes. Even in the case of such a busy hive as Pailton there are many quiet periods, and some people simply cannot 'see ghosts.' The odds are very much against your desire being granted, though, if you are psychic, the atmosphere of the place would affect you at once."

"How?"

"Well, you've often heard of people who know by some obscure but infallible instinct that there's a cat in the room. Just so. However, I'll certainly give you the chance. It won't seriously disturb me. I can get the key in the morning from the woman who looks after it, though I need hardly say she doesn't sleep there. There is no need for a caretaker. It was broken into once, but the burglar was found dead in the dining room, and since then the crooks have given it a wide berth."

"It really is dangerous, then?"

"Beginning to feel a bit prudent?"

"No, I shall feel safe with you."

"Very well then. After coming back from golf we'll pay a visit. It will be dark by five, and we'll make the excursion about six. The chances of gratifying your curiosity will be better after dark. I'd better tell you something else. I never quite know how these places are going to affect me. Before now, I have gone off into a kind of trance and been decidedly weird, my dear Jim. My sense of time and space becomes distorted, though for your assurance I may say," he added smiling, "I am never dangerous when in this condition. Furthermore, you must be prepared to make acquaintance with a mode of existence in which the ordinary laws of existence which you have always known abdicate themselves. Bierce called his famous book of ghost stories, *Can These Things Be?* Assuredly they can. Now I'm sounding pompous and pontifical, but some such warning is necessary. When I touch that front door tomorrow I may become in a sense a stranger to you; once inside we shall cross a frontier into a region with its own laws of time and space, and

where the seemingly impossible can happen. . . . Do you understand what I mean and still want to go?"

"Yes," replied Brinton, "to all your questions."

"Very well then," said Lander, "I will now get out the chessmen and discover a complete answer to Reti's opening which you sprang on me last night; so you shall have the white pieces."

November twenty-first was a lazy, drowsy, cloudless day, starting with a sharp ground frost which, thawing unresistingly as the sun climbed, made the tees at Ellesborough like tiny slides. In consequence, neither Brinton nor Lander played very good golf. This upset Brinton not at all, for he was thinking much more of that which was beginning to impress him as a possible ordeal, the crossing of the threshold of Pailton a few hours later. As they finished their second round a mist, spreading like a gigantic spider's web, was beginning to raise the level of the Buckinghamshire fields. As they walked homewards it climbed with them, keeping pace with them like a dog; sometimes hurrying ahead, then dropping back, but always with them.

It was exactly five o'clock as they reached Laymer's. Tea was ready. "Do you still want to go, Jim?" asked Lander abruptly.

"Sure, Bo!" replied Brinton lightly.

"Here's the key," said Lander, smiling, "the Open Sesame of the Chamber of Horrors. The electric light is turned off, so all the light we shall have will be produced by my torch. One last word of advice—if you want to get the best chance of a thrill, try to keep your mind quite empty—don't talk as I personally conduct this tour. Concentrate on *not* concentrating."

"I understand what you mean," said Brinton.

"Well, then, let's get a move on," said Lander.

An idea suddenly occurred to Brinton. "How will you be able to show me over it if you've never been inside it?"

"You needn't worry about that," replied Lander.

The fog was thick by now, and they wavered slightly as they groped their way down the lane, compressed by high hedges, which led to Pailton. When they reached it, Brinton's eyes turned up to observe the windows on the second floor. And then Lander stepped forward and placed the key in the lock.

As the door swung open the fog, which seemed to have been crouching at his heels, leapt forward and entered with him and inundated the passage down which he moved. The moment he was inside, something advanced to meet him. He opened a door on the

left of the passage and flashed his torch round it. The fog was in there too. Jim, he could feel, was at his elbow.

"This is where they found the burglar—it's the dining room."

His voice was not quite under control. "Quite a pleasant room, smells a bit frowsty." The little beam wandered from chair to desk, settling for a moment here and there. Then he shut the door and stepped along the passage till the little beam revealed a flight of stairs which he began to climb. He still heard Brinton's steps coming up behind him. Up on the first floor he opened another door. "This is the drawing room," he said. "The Proctors' cook was found dead here in 1921." Round swung the tiny beam, fastening on chairs, tables, desks, curtains. He shut the door and began to climb another flight of stairs. He could hear Jim's feet pattering up behind him. On the second floor he opened still another door. "This, my dear Jim, is the nasty one; it was from here Amy Pendexter fell and broke her neck."

His voice had risen slightly, and he was speaking quickly. Once again he flashed his torch over chairs, tables, curtains, and ahead.

"Well, Jim, do you get any reaction? Do you? You can speak now." As there was no answer, he turned, and swung the beam of his torch onto the person just behind him. But it wasn't Brinton who was standing at his elbow. . . .

"What's the matter, Willie?" asked Brinton. "Can't you find the keyhole?" The figure in front of him remained motionless.

"Can't you find the keyhole?" asked Brinton more urgently.

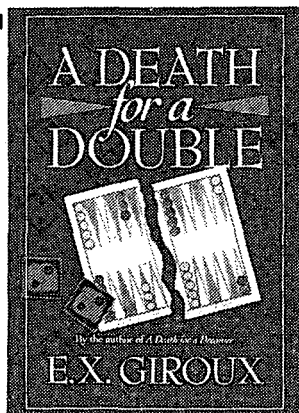
As the figure still remained motionless, Jim Brinton lit a match and peered forward. . . . And then he reeled back.

"Who, in God's name, are you?" he cried.

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



He is pale, formal, impassive, embittered, and afraid to face his past. He keeps a russet-colored cat. He is always dressed in the "working uniform of the barrister"—a sober dark suit, a chalk-white shirt, and a narrow striped tie—and when he does attempt to break out of this formal garb, others suggest that he would do better to dress more formally. Robert Forsythe was a child prodigy—the son of a prominent barrister, from a long line of barristers—who passed the bar at an unusually young age and began practice with much promise of brilliant success. He quit at the age of twenty-seven. While we are never told what specifically caused him to retire so soon, we do learn he had done

something sufficient to have him disbarred, that this something had to do with a woman, and that he retired before disbarment action could be taken. He has become a recluse by the time the series opens, living in his father's house and relying on his (and formerly his father's) secretary to protect him from the real world.

She is austere, a "greyhound" with iron-gray hair (at least until *A Death for a Dietitian* when it turned a glossy silver with the assistance of a hairdresser) and cool blue eyes who can look deep into Forsythe's soul and penetrate all his defenses. Abigail Sanderson knows that, even if he is not practicing law, the law is important to Forsythe. She encourages him

in pursuing detective work, to such a degree that she acts as the primary detective in three of the books.

• *A Death for Adonis* (St. Martin's, 1984; Bantam, 1986) introduces us to Forsythe the recluse who has avoided the Temple for six years, making him thirty-three at the start of the series. He is drawn out of retirement by Elizabeth Calvert Pennell, adopted daughter of famed sculptor Sebastian Calvert who, twenty-five years earlier, was convicted of the murder of his model and lover, David Mersey. Bennell wants Forsythe to prove her now-dead father innocent. At the urging of Sandy, Forsythe begins to delve into the past to find out who would want to commit, and be capable of, such a brutal crime. In the course of his investigation, he must face up to his own past, allowing him to return to his law practice in succeeding books.

Forsythe is going on vacation in *A Death for A Darling* (St. Martin's 1985; Bantam, 1986), a fishing trip in the north, to be exact, several years after returning to the law and therefore several years after *A Death for Adonis*. While he is preparing for a month-long trip to Scotland, Sandy goes off to visit a friend and finds a movie in the making starring Erika Von Farr, Forsythe's favorite actor and appearance with the real

tress. So, being the thoughtful lady she is, Sandy calls Forsythe before he finishes packing and invites him for tea and a surprise on his drive north. Unfortunately, Von Farr's co-star, Mickey Darling, is murdered on that supposedly idyllic weekend, and Forsythe forsakes fishing for detecting.

In *A Death for a Dancer* (St. Martin's 1986; Bantam, 1986), a solicitor acquaintance brings Forsythe into a case involving the Dancers, an eccentric family who had been robbed by one Katherine St. Croix. The solicitor wants Forsythe, who has now earned the nickname "Mission Impossible" Forsythe from the tabloids to investigate the subsequent disappearance and murder of St. Croix and the discovery of her body on the Dancer estate.

Sandy masquerades as a cousin of Gillian Foster, resident of Maddersly-on-Mead, charming wife of kindly Dr. Foster, and murder victim along with the good doctor and their two young sons, in her first solo detective role in *A Death for a Doctor* (St. Martin's, 1986; Bantam, 1987). The mystery: who killed the Foster family, leaving the infant Lucy untouched? She is recruited by dapper Chief Inspector Adam Kepesake, with Robby's furious opposition, because of a similarity in names

cousin. Robby sees that Sandy might be in danger, even if Kepesake is blind to the possibility.

Winslow Maxwell Penndragon is a not-very-likeable man, a hedonist who prides himself on never having worked for a living. He never expected anyone to want him dead, but after two failed attempts on his life, he asks Robby and Sandy to investigate in *A Death for a Dilettante* (St. Martin's, 1987). Robby, complete with a walking cast from a disastrous ski trip in Switzerland (this injury continues to plague him in subsequent books), is bored. Since he is unable to keep up with his practice on crutches and painkillers, he decides that detection might make a suitable diversion.

In *A Death for a Dietitian* (St. Martin's, 1988), Sandy is invited to a murder weekend at a fashionable private island resort, to act as the detective in a weekend murder party. It sounds like fun until a famous chef, and later his homely wife, are found murdered and the guests are stranded. Now Sandy must act as a real detective, with no help from Robby.

A Death for a Dreamer (St. Martin's, 1989) also employs Sandy as the major detective, although Robby helps out eventually. The donation of dogs by a pet food company for use

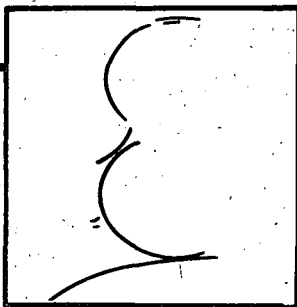
as therapy in a nursing home is a central theme in this mystery.

Giroux's most recent book in the series, *A Death for a Double*, (St. Martin's, 1990, \$15.95), explores the fragile ego of Forsythe. Anthony Funicelli has married Lucie, a child bride, and brought her back to England to live with his mother, teenage twins from a former marriage, and a lookalike cousin. When Anthony begins to get threats on his life, he calls in Forsythe, and then hesitates to tell Robby the real reason for his call. Robby forms an unreasonable dislike for Funicelli and prepares to depart for home. As he is leaving, he finds that the lookalike cousin has been murdered and Robby must solve the crime.

E. X. Giroux, a Canadian, has created a pair of British detectives who get into the business by accident; who, in the course of amateur detection, make contacts that prove useful in subsequent investigations; and who develop a reputation as redoubtable sleuths. Robert Forsythe and Abigail Sanderson have special knowledge, special skill. It makes them a fascinating team, respected by the police and lionized by the press. Certainly Forsythe is the barrister of choice, should you be accused of a heinous crime in England!

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Cult crime writer Jim Thompson just finished one of his more successful years—and he's been dead since 1976.

With three of his novels turned into films, this prince of pulp fiction is experiencing a resurgence in popularity he might have chuckled at, considering the meager turnout for his own funeral and the raw hand he felt Hollywood dealt him when he was alive.

The best-known screen adaptation of a Jim Thompson book is *The Getaway*, a 1972 Sam Peckinpah film starring Steve McQueen. But other Hollywood successes eluded Thompson for the most part.

The latest Thompson stories brought to film are *After Dark*, *My Sweet*, which stars Rachel Ward and Bruce Dern; *The Grifters*, with Anjelica Huston and John Cusack; and *The Kill-Off*.

The latter is the big-screen treatment of a 1957 experimental novel that used a different narrator for each chapter. It features a host of lesser-known actors and, compared with the others, is a low-budget flick.

The Kill-Off is set in a small town on the New Jersey shore with a big sky, sandy beach, and endless ocean, but with Thompson's penchant for dark haunts you would barely know it. Although it is filmed in color, director Maggie Greenwald gives it a black and white feel.

The story looks at the actions of a manipulative woman and the way she runs people's lives. The cast of oddball characters that inhabit this twisted Thompson tale make the movie worth watching, despite a sometimes-tedious, barely discernible plot line.

The central figure is town gossip Luane Devore (Loretta Gross). Played as a combina-

tion Blanche Dubois and Nora Desmond, this self-proclaimed invalid spends almost the entire film in bed, tied to the outside only by her old fashioned black rotary telephone and by her dimwitted but devoted husband Ralph (Steve Monroe).

Theirs is a strange relationship. Married when he was eighteen and she thirty-five, the couple became outcasts. While Luane is wicked, conniving, and manipulative, Ralph is sweet and simple. He dotes on her, preparing and serving her the same breakfast every morning—a pair of fried eggs, peppered just right, toast, a bowl of cereal and fruit. She, in turn, insulates him from the real world and keeps him dependent on her.

Thompson's story weaves a rich web of relationships, all with Luane at the core. From her tattered stuffed pink headboard she's got something on everyone.

There's Pete (Jackson Sims), the ginger-ale-guzzling owner of the failing local saloon, and his fresh-faced daughter, Myra (Jordan Fox), stuck in a dead end while she waitresses for him. Myra's boyfriend is Bobby (Andrew Lee Barrett), the so-

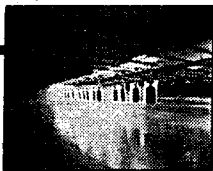
ciopathic son of the meek town doctor. Rags (William Russell), the acne-scarred bartender, enjoys a shot or two or three—whatever it takes to keep him from remembering his own miserable past. But when a stranger comes to town, in the form of not-so-exotic dancer Danny Lee (Cathy Haase), Luane's life takes a decided turn for the worse.

Because Luane is losing control, the incestuous social fabric in town begins to unravel. Soon every loser in the neighborhood, including her own husband, has reason to want Luane dead. And there's an almost comical race to see if one of them can actually pull off the crime.

The Kill-Off concludes on a violent note, which unfortunately is more of an exclamation point marking the end of the film than a resolution of any questions raised.

Without exception, this cast of little-knowns does a bang-up job with a minimalist story. But it's not the story that makes *The Kill-Off* stand out, it's Thompson's desperate characters and the overall mood of the picture that make it worthwhile.

THE STORY THAT WON



The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Anke Kriske of Storrs, Connecticut. Honorable mentions went to Laurel Natale of House-Whittier, California; Mary-Ann Gallant of Stuyvesant, New York; S. Jean Wright of Kent, Washington; Thomas C. Martin of Euclid, Ohio; Lawrence Gardner Boyd of Brent, Alabama; Aysen Young of New Orleans, Louisiana; Perry E. Pariseau of Owosso, Michigan; and Charlie Wilke of Munster, Indiana.

tograph contest was won by necticut. Honorable mentions ton, Texas; Gerald Marka of ann Gallant of Stuyvesant, Kent, Washington; Thomas

THE PUT-DOWN by Anke Kriske

Timothy Stuart sat crosslegged on the cold cement floor, his back against the wall. "Well, there I was," he said to the young detective who stood above him, "trying to learn how to target shoot with a .38. It was the first time I had ever handled a gun. Jim brought me here to the shooting gallery first thing this morning. I wanted to practice in privacy."

"Who turned down the lights?"

"He did. The glare bothered my eyes. Jim was always trying to help. It was an irritating quality."

"And things weren't going well," the detective prompted, writing down the information in his spiral black notebook.

Stuart stared at the unmarked targets. "I honestly thought I could hit one of the figures. My usual bad luck. Jim kept snickering."

"You got upset."

"A bit. But I was used to his patronizing. We worked together for eleven years."

The detective pumped him gently. "And then?"

"He started laughing outright. He was like that. Kept saying that I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. He stood between the targets and said go ahead and shoot." Stuart fell silent for a moment. "He kept goading me, taunting me. Suddenly, he shouted 'bang!' I was startled. I pulled the trigger accidentally." His sigh was painful. "I was out of bullets! I was so upset to have missed the perfect opportunity to kill him that I walked up to him and cracked his skull with the butt of the .38."

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BEAUTIFUL ENGLISH SPEAKING Filipinas want men of all ages as Life Partners. Videos available: PAL, 51 Blanca, CO 81123-0051. 1-900-860-3033. \$3.00/per minute. Adults.

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ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948. (415) 897-2742.

MEET Beautiful Women! We supply photos, names, addresses! Send for Free Details! Merit, Box 74758-AE, Los Angeles, CA 90004.

ASIAN WOMEN desire friendship, marriage! Free details, photos! **SUNSHINE INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE**, Box 5500-HF, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii 96745. (808) 325-7707.

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE GENTLEMEN seek American ladies & gentlemen for Friendship/Romance/Marriage! Free details: English Rose Agency, 2nd Floor, Mill Lane House, Mill Lane, Margate, Kent, England: Tel: 01144-843-290735.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

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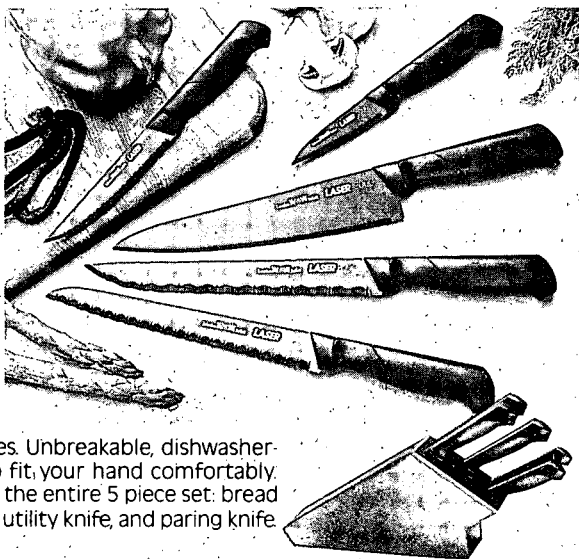
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▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

The secret behind Regent Sheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife. **\$129.98** (\$7.00) #A1933.

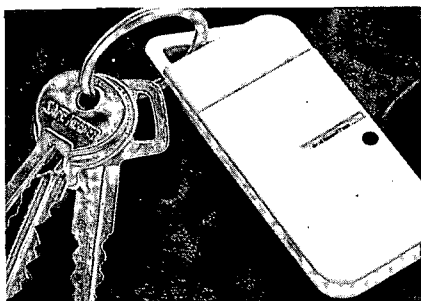


▼ THE MAGICAL SPARE BED

It's almost like pulling an extra bed out of a hat. Unlike most spare beds that gobble up storage space and are unwieldy to move, this one rolls down to fit a 36" long, 3" diameter canvas case, to stash in a closet corner, car trunk, camper, anywhere. Yet it unrolls in minutes to a full-size 27" x 73" bed that will even accommodate 6-footers, supports up to 500 pounds and is comfortable to boot. The secret's in the inventive construction: a cotton canvas sling is supported on laminated steel legs with 6 steel springs for cushioning and stability on rough ground. Toss the carrying strap over your shoulder and go — camping, beach, poolside; the 10" legs keep it off damp ground and sand. Of course, this bed is indispensable at home, country home, dorm — even for kids in motel rooms. A superb value at **\$61.98** (\$12.25) #A1931.

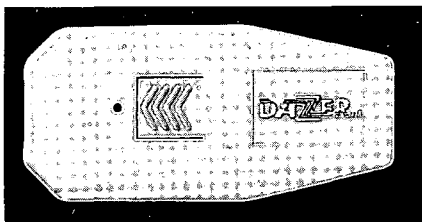


▼ EASY KEY FINDER



Keyes are misplaced more often than any other modern essential. Now thanks to our easy key finder your keys can tell you where you put them. Clap your hands 4 times and it will chirp electronically. Works up to 30' away. Special hybrid microchip design requires no on/off switch (other units need you to turn them ON before you lose your keys). This unit has a high-impact plastic case; weighs a mere 1/2oz; comes with its own key ring; measures only 2 1/2" x 1 1/8" x 3/8". Batteries and a 30-day manufacturer's warranty are included. **\$13.98** (\$3.00) #A1889; two units, **\$23.98** (\$4.00) #A1890.

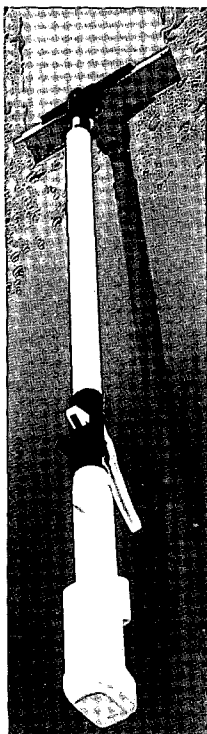
▼ HELPFUL TO HUMANS HARMLESS TO DOGS



Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4 3/4" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **\$29.98**, (\$3.00) #A1829X.

▼ YES, IT DOES WINDOWS — IN HALF THE TIME

Do we exaggerate? Actually, it may take less than half the time you'd normally spend assembling, toting and juggling bottles or buckets, rags, a hose, a stepstool. Spray & Wipe™ combines in one implement an ample reservoir for your cleaning fluid, a spray trigger at the base and adjustable mist-to-spray head at top, plus a squeegee. At 34" long, it eliminates much climbing; is lightweight but sturdy for firm leverage on the squeegee; swivel head reaches angles. Think patio doors, shower stalls, boats, campers, windshields, et al. **\$15.98** (\$4.00) #A1865X.



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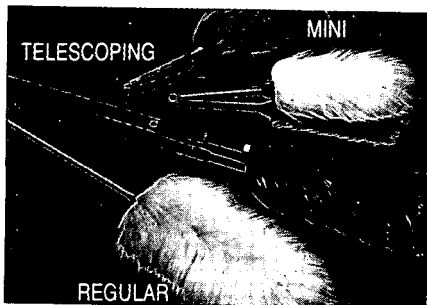
▼ YOGURT CHEESE FUNNEL & RECIPE BOOK



In less than a minute, you can make the newest, healthiest most economical spread — just spoon plain yogurt into this woven plastic funnel, place in the frig, in 8-14 hrs. you have really creamy cheese. Using 1½% milkfat yogurt, it has 90% less fat, ⅔ calories but over twice the calcium of commercial cream cheese. Yet most people including avowed yogurt haters can't tell the difference! Use the 142 page recipe book included or substitute for cream cheese, mayonnaise, or sour cream in your favorite recipes. Funnel holds up to 16oz. Makes about 8oz. of yogurt cheese. Our set provides 142 page recipe book, 1 funnel, you'll have enough for the lemon cheesecake shown above — scrumptious and a mere 125 calories. **\$26.98** (\$5.00) #A1892.

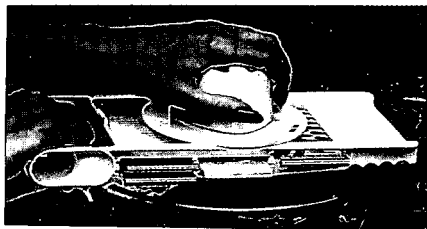


▼ DUST MAGNETS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet — lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters for extra fragile objects. **\$22.98** (\$4.00) #A1870.

▼ GOOD NATURED GRATER



The Leifheit 4-in-1 grater is a sure-grip food holder that lets you work at top speed with no fear of flaying your fingers. Molded hand-grip gives sure control, indentations seat the grater securely atop bowls from 4½" to 9½" diameter. Blades are stainless steel, store right in grater frame, and provide choice of small and large shredders, medium grater, and ground-edge slicer. The unit itself is made of tough ABS plastic, dishwasher safe. Imported from West Germany. It's the first truly civilized grater we've seen. **\$22.98** (\$4.25) #A1910.

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